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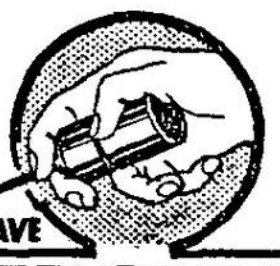

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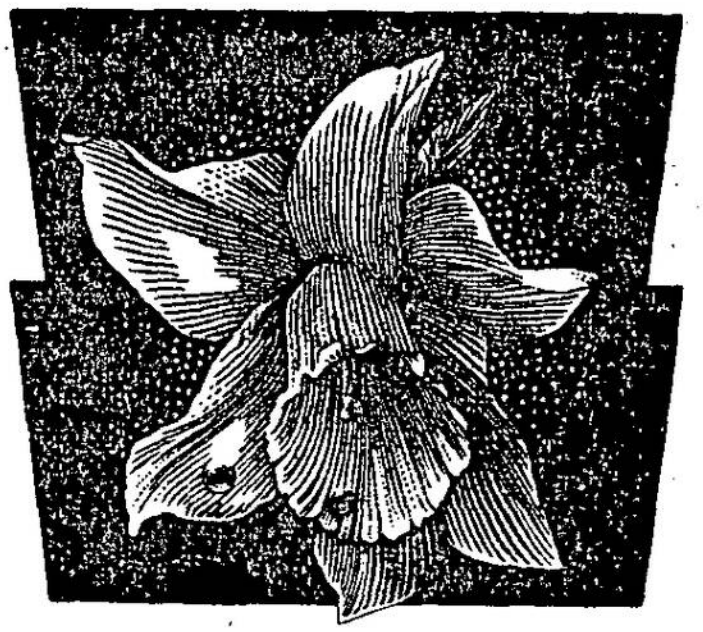

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ARGOSY

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Fulfilment

THERE is no month in the whole year, in which nature wears a more beautiful appearance than in the month of August. Spring has many beauties, and May is a fresh and blooming month, but the charms of this time of year are enhanced by their contrast with the winter season. August has no such advantage.

It comes when we remember nothing but clear skies, green fields and sweet-smelling flowers—when the recollection of snow, and ice, and bleak winds, has faded from our minds as completely as they have disappeared from the earth—and yet what a pleasant time it is! Orchards and cornfields ring with the hum of labour; trees bend beneath the thick clusters of rich fruit which bow their branches to the ground; and the corn, piled in graceful sheaves, or waving in every light breath that sweeps above it, as if it wooed the sickle, tinges the landscape with a golden hue.

A mellow softness appears to hang over the whole earth; the influence of the season seems to extend itself to the very waggon, whose slow motion across the well-reaped field is perceptible only to the eye, but strikes with no harsh sound upon the ear . . .

CHARLES DICKENS

WHY SHOULD I CRY?

"I'm not a nice girl," she said. "I'm tough"

by I. A. R. WYLIE

SHE had, as Bob Denner said in explanation of his unusual handling of her, about everything it takes. Youth, of course; the kind of flamboyant prettiness—a little brassy from the front rows of the orchestra stalls—which registered in the back row of the gallery; a lithe provocative body which could stand itself on its head with the ease of a young gutter-snipe; a warm, unexpectedly deep-pitched voice—totally untrained. But who wanted a trained voice? It was just its husky imperfections—the suggestion that the young brat was singing her lungs out for the devil of it that made her songs show-stoppers.

She was also tough.

"If anybody's going to get kicked around in this dump," she'd served notice on Bob at their first rehearsal, "it's not going to be me."

He'd taken notice. The rest of the cast took an extra beating. But where Jenny Adair was concerned he kept his vitriolic tongue in aspic. "You can't direct volcanoes," he'd said. "They have to blow their tops." He'd added with malice, "In a couple of years she'll blow herself right off the map."

Meantime she was, admittedly, better than good box-office.

She came on to the stage, late as usual, like a tornado that had passed, picking up this and that *en route*. Even Bob Denner side-stepped her with the mock panic of a man who has escaped destruction by a hair's breadth.

"Some fool of a taxi driver," she stormed at no one in particular. She stood looking about her, tossing the famous dark red mane and jangling jewellery. The stage looked normal enough—the curtain up, the empty seats in their dust covers staring at its glamorous, shabby backdrops, like toothless ghosts. The rest of the cast had withdrawn discreetly to the wings. Only the black-haired lean man idly tinkling the yellow keys of the worn-out piano seemed unaware that Jenny Adair had now, at long last, made her entry. At the sight of him her wandering attention came to a dead halt.

"And who the blazes are you?" she asked.

He only half-turned, still tinkling.

" Name of Nick Bannister," he said. " I can guess who you are."

" What do you mean—you can guess ? " she demanded, outraged.

" I mean I recognize the vibrations," he said.

She swung round furiously. But Denner had ducked out of range to the front row of the stalls.

" Where's old Charlie ? "

" Gone like the wind. He told me that you threw a prop at him and that you aim straight. He says he's grown too old to dodge. So I'm pinch-hitting for him—if hitting's the word for it."

She thumped a huge handbag down on the piano top, tossed a mink coat to a passing pair of stage hands and stood crudely with her fists stemmed on her slender hips, glowering at him.

" How are you at dodging ? " she asked.

" Poor," he said. " But then people don't throw things at me. At least not any more. It's just not done."

For the first time he turned his dark, blunt-featured face full on her. You couldn't put your finger on the scars. But they were there. A battered face. Young too. And hard. But unlike hers it had lost the capacity for laughter. It could only jeer.

" For the love of Mike—what's wrong with you ? "

" Blind," he stated coolly. " Stone. But I can play anything you can sing, and more and better." He struck the first chords of her big number and even sang the first line, throwing out his chest and squaring his heavy shoulders. He sounded mockingly like a blues singer of the 'twenties and the words even sillier than they were. " *I'll bet my heart on you,*" he mimicked throatily and a bit off key. Then he turned serious and played the poor thing straight. " Now you show me," he said.

But she crossed over to the right of him, stalking him like a baffled tigress, uncertain of her kill, and a brown-gold shadow at his feet gave out a small roll of thunder, not menacing but meaningful.

" And what may that be ? " she asked.

" Technically my Seeing Eyes. By name, Mick. He won't bite. He's only telling you, ' The guy's mine. Lay off.' "

" A dog," she said. " What kind of dog ? "

" A kind dog," he said.

He repeated the song's opening phrase with an inexorable patience until she began to sing, at first sullenly, like a spoilt and angry child. In her short swing skirt and high-heeled shoes she tapped out her dance routine, indolently casual, making mistakes, leaving out whole sequences. But then, perhaps because he played the way she felt, she danced, hot footed, as though to a packed and responsive house. When she stopped the silence blew in her face like a cold wind. It caught her breath.

" That's good, Jenny," Bob Denner said soothingly from down under. " That's a sure fire hit."

But she didn't seem to care what he felt about it. She tossed back the dark red curls.

" Well," she asked, " how does it hit you, maestro ? "

" It doesn't." He cocked his head at a dubious C-flat. " But then I don't react properly. I'm punch drunk."

He ran through her other numbers, one after the other. He explained, " I listened in to a couple of rehearsals. When you've lost your eyes you take to your ears. It's as simple as that."

But she remained stubbornly silent until he had played himself out and sat in an attitude of aloof patience, with his slender hands resting on the keys. Then she snatched up her bag.

" You're wonderful," she said. " Just too wonderful. You know it all and so do I. So what's keeping us ? Let's go—"

He stood up at once and the gold-brown little sheep dog stood up with him. He took hold of the stiff upright harness and the two of them moved slowly but unfalteringly to the wings. She watched them as, at the head of the iron circular stairs that were a death trap to the unwary, the dog halted for a moment, lifting the fine-pointed muzzle in acknowledgment of danger. Then they went on down, the soft pads falling just ahead of the man's heavier footfalls. Both faded into silence.

" I hoped he'd break his neck," she said. " I'd liked to have told him, ' After all, you aren't that clever.' " She swung the fur coat over her shoulders. " You sack that man, Bob. Or I'll sack myself. Then you can see where you get with your rotten show."

Bob Denner leant against the apron, his tired, malevolent monkey face wedged between his fists.

" Listen, Sweetness and Light. He's good. It isn't everyone who can carry a full score inside his noddle. For Pete's sake, don't make him mad."

" He was needling me," she said. " And on general principles I don't stand for it."

He growled after her, " You shouldn't throw things, loveliest. One of these days you'll throw a boomerang."

But she was out of hearing.

She overtook the two of them on the kerb outside the theatre lights. Her name was going up, for the first time, in full-sized letters. But he couldn't see them. So, for the moment, they didn't do her any good. It was true what he'd said. People don't throw things at a blind man. Even the snorting, jockeying taxis held up for him. Not because they were sorry for him. She sensed respect in their warning gestures to each other. Perhaps it was because

everyone respects success, and a man who can hold up midday traffic is a success of sorts.

In the restaurant across the way the dog cleared a path between scurrying waiters and petulant clientèle. He found a vacant, familiar table and lay down at the man's feet with the content of an honest job well down. He could take his dog nap, sudden but light. She'd heard of tricks like that, and this was a trick all right. It had drawn all the limelight away from her. She stood looking about her, arrogantly resentful. But there was no other table vacant. The head waiter shrugged apologetic shoulders and she laughed sulkily.

" In this cock-eyed world the blind man gets all the luck," she said. " How about returning good for evil, Maestro, and sharing a table with me ? "

He looked up, missing her eyes by a hair's breadth. His own under the straight black brows were a luminous grey. It was difficult to believe that they were dead.

" So long as you don't call me Maestro. The name is Bannister. You can call me Nick. You will anyway— Or ' darling ' if you have to—"

The waiter pulled up a chair for her. She settled herself flamboyantly, tossing back her curls, shrugging off the luxurious coat, jangling her jewelled bracelets. She was Jenny Adair—née Binns, orphan brat and a newly risen star, sharing her limelight with some poor blind man. Look all you want, folks. The show is on the house.

" What evil, by the way ? " the man asked casually.

" I've just had you sacked," she said. " But it's O.K. Treat me right and I'll put you back again."

" You like kicking people, don't you ? " he asked, " —in and out, upstairs and downstairs."

" Turn and turn about," she said. " I've been kicked enough in my time." She offered by way of explanation, not apology, " You were showing off. And I hate show-offs. I show off myself."

" Showing off is the privilege of the under-privileged," he said. " It's a defence mechanism."

" I'm strictly a simple girl," she told him. " Make it easier."

" I mean that having lost my eyes I show off my superior ears— just as you are brash and brutal because you're scared."

She brought her attention fully to bear on him.

" Me ? Scared ? Of what ? "

" Perhaps of being kicked again."

" Not in this life." She tossed over her shoulder, " Lobster salad and coffee and for heaven's sake make the coffee hot." She turned back to him. " Perhaps you're scared yourself."

" Not in my Ivory Tower."

She lit a cigarette and then, on impulse, she leant forward and put it between his lips. Like a child who has planted a fire-cracker in the path of some unwary victim she watched mischievously for the explosion. There was none. His face remained blank. He stubbed out the cigarette in the ash tray near his hand.

" Thanks. I can light my own cigarettes. I'll smoke later."

Anyhow he couldn't see her. And she could sound as bored as he was.

" And what's an Ivory Tower ? " she asked.

" A safe place. A very nice safe place. No one can come inside who isn't asked. It has a fine lookout. I can see what I want to see. I can't see what I don't like. I can be sacked or hired. I don't give a damn. The roof doesn't leak. We're provided with all we need. We're out of reach of bombs and scratches—"

She gave a little grin, half rueful, half exasperated.

" So scratching's wasted effort. O.K. I won't scratch." She accepted a proffered menu. " Want me to order for you ? "

" Thanks. They know here what I like. You don't have to cut up my meat for me or press the salt into my pitifully groping hand. You can relax."

" You certainly can find your way—" She added, "—you two," with a touch of sulkiness.

" Six years is a long time to learn."

" War ? " she asked. But as though she did not really want to know.

" A Jap guard with a sure hand and a subtle sense of humour." He pointed his forefingers at his temple. " Bang. Straight as a die. Missing everything but the optic nerve. He'd thought I was a painter. He must have laughed himself sick."

" He never found out that you played the piano ? "

" Lucky, wasn't it ? It might have given him ideas. Anyhow, I'm not so good."

" Good enough to rehearse this rotten show."

" This smash hit," he corrected smoothly.

She moved restlessly and her foot encountered something warm and soft that eased itself out of reach.

" If that dog of yours bites my leg," she said, " I'll sue for damages—" She added with a husky chuckle, "—to my sole means of support."

" You'd still have your voice," he pointed out.

" My legs are better."

" Good," he said. " I'm glad."

She gave his blank face a distrustful side glance. He wasn't to know that he was getting under her guard. She said good-

humouredly, " You're being damned rude in a quiet way, darling. But my ma and pa started beating me when I was three, I'm tough leather. You can't scratch me either."

" In that case we can eat in peace," he said.

They did eat for a while in silence. But it wasn't peaceful. She wasn't used to silence. The man's aloofness fretted her. She could make him hear her. But she couldn't make him see her. Once he bent down and spoke softly to the dog at his feet and she felt shut out—an intruder on a strange all-sufficing companionship. She said roughly, " You're not such a bad-looking guy. Why don't you get a girl to lead you round ? A nice girl. The woods are full of 'em—"

" I had a nice girl once," he said equably. " But she got bored with leading me round. I'm not asking twice. I don't have to." He laid his hand on the dog's head now resting on his knee. " Mick knows his job. He's taught me mine. We look after each other. We don't need nice girls. We don't even like 'em much."

" Well, perhaps dogs are best." She sounded suddenly tired. " I wouldn't know. I've never given a damn for anything that breathed—except me, of course. You don't get yourself hurt like that."

" The great thing," he said, " is to keep well out of reach."

She collected her bill, tossed down an outrageous tip and stood up noisily.

" Thanks for the company. There's a rehearsal called for two thirty. I'll be seeing you."

She saw the corners of his bruised-looking mouth quiver.

" I'll be hearing you," he said.

The producer had called a semi-official meeting in his office. It included Bob Denner, the stage manager, Jenny's agent, and Jenny Adair herself. She sat in the midst of the four men and let them play round her and up to her. Their flattery had done a lot for her. She'd luxuriated in their ready-made endearments, their lavish parties, the sense of power over them and, best of all, of belonging to them. The days when she'd belonged to no one—a rag-tag-and-bobtail stray scrounging a meal here and a handout there—were over. She was safe on top with the best of them. These men were her friends—all the real family she'd ever known. Their hands were outstretched to claim her and hold her fast. Smooth, well kept hands. A shade too plump. Perhaps it was just tiredness that made her feel like this about them.

Bob had taken the floor as he had said he would. " Leave me to handle her," he'd said. " I know her little ways."

Now he stood in front of her, his arms folded, propping himself

against the producer's desk—a tired-looking, engaging and honest little monkey.

"It's like this, Jenny," he said. "We're sold out for three months. We've an idea we'll be rewriting the show for the third time three years from now. Our contract with you is for six months—or less if the show fades. Which it won't. Now we don't kid ourselves and we aren't trying to kid you. You're the whole works. You walk out on us and we walk out with you. That's why we're here. We want you, like a good trouper, to sign up for the whole stretch—if it runs into five years."

"That's nice of you." She met each pair of hot, attentive eyes in turn. One of these days she'd like them all again. "On my terms," she said.

"Of course. We'll talk them over with old Ben here. We won't quarrel."

She looked down at her own pretty feet in the expensive shoes. The kind of shoes that had once been a feature in a child's dream. She was reckoning that in five years—even with that Income Tax man staking a claim—she'd be a rich woman. She'd be able to stand herself a Rolls and a smart chauffeur to wait at the stage door. That had been part of the dream too. There was something wrong with her. Because she didn't seem to want it any more. There wasn't a darned thing she did want—except to keep these friends of hers guessing.

"I'll think it over, boys," she said.

One of them made an impatient gesture, but Bob winked him down. He knew his Jenny. She was just playing a game for the hell of it.

"All right. Why not?" he said.

The producer shook up a cocktail to celebrate.

"How are you and our blind wonder boy getting on?" he asked.

"Fine," she said. "We're not even speaking."

Which was almost true. They'd never lunched together again. They didn't greet each other. But she knew he knew when she was on the stage—when she came close to him. She danced and sang to make him aware of her. She guessed in a baffled sort of way that he played to get something out of her that she didn't know about and that he wanted. Between them they'd put things into the show its authors had never hoped for or even dreamed of. The day he'd turned his dark, battered-looking face towards her with the beginnings of a young grin of pleasure, she'd felt as she'd felt that first night when the whole house had risen to her, calling.

"I'll knock an honest-to-goodness laugh out of him yet," she'd boasted to herself. "I'll rock that Ivory Tower of his."

She drove home to the expensive block of flats with its marble

lobby and gold-festooned doorman and the flat which she had taken after that first hit under the delusion that it was smart. She rang him up. That was something she had never done before.

" I've got a sore throat or I've stubbed my toe or something, Nick Bannister," she said. " I'm not rehearsing in that draughty dump and I've told Bob so. Get in a taxi and come round. You don't need your dog. I'll tell 'em downstairs to look out for you."

" It's Mick and me or nobody," he said.

" They don't allow dogs—"

" Too bad," he said.

" All right, all right. I'll fix it. Just come."

Now he and Mick stood on the threshold of the spacious drawing room. He had thrown back his dark head, sensing the place. Even Mick was sniffing at it. She said ruefully. " It's awful, isn't it ? "

" It smells loudly of sudden opulence," he said.

" I suppose the agent saw me coming," she said. " They put one over on me. How was I to know—"

" You couldn't," he said.

She left him alone. She knew that much about him now. There was one familiar object in the room—a grand piano set open and waiting. Mick went towards it, doubtfully, as though for once he wasn't sure. The man swung the adjustable stool to his height and sat down. He played a little run like a question.

" They didn't fool you on this item."

" I know a piano when I—I hear it," she said.

He began at once to play " *I'll bet my heart on you,*" and she said quickly, " Must we ? I mean right off ? I'm so darned sick of it. I sing it in my sleep."

" Five years from now you won't have to bother to wake up."

" It's not such a bad song—is it ? " she asked defensively. " I mean—a lot of people must feel like that about each other. It sort of sings for them."

" Well," he said, " that's what makes the hit. It's tripe. But it's honest tripe."

" Well, perhaps that's me too—just honest tripe."

She might have struck him on a naked nerve. He said angrily, " Don't be a damn fool," and began to play again as though he were trying to shout down the brief exasperating pain. This music was something different. It took her way out of her depth. But it was exciting, like a sea in which you had to swim—or drown.

" You wrote that—didn't you ? "

" How did you guess ? "

" I didn't guess. I knew. It's like you."

" You don't know what I'm like."

" You do think I'm a fool, don't you ? "

"No," he said. "Just out of my world."

"There's only one world," she said, "and we're all in it."

Nick turned as though to slap her down again. She was leaning against the piano, looking at him steadily. He seemed to know and to feel suddenly unsure and baffled.

"One of these days I'll write something worthwhile," he said.

"You can make that Jap laugh out of the other side of his mouth," she told him.

"If he's got a mouth."

He began to play again and to sing in his pleasant baritone—something in a strange language.

"Du bist die Ruh
Der Friede mild—"

And then broke off and laughed as though at himself.

"What's that mean?"

"Roughly, 'You are my peace, my dear content.'"

"Not like me at all, is it?"

"I don't suppose Schubert had you in mind. Like to try it? Never mind the words. Just sing with me. And not from that poor manhandled throat. Sing from here—" He indicated somewhere below his own chest—"easily. Try it."

She tried to do as he told her, watching his absorbed and listening face. It was queer how easy it was—once you got the idea. You let your throat relax. You took your breath deep and full. And it was as though she'd heard the song somewhere before—in some other life. At the end she faltered a little and he lifted his face, smiling. She had never seen him really smile before.

"An unexpected ending," he said. "But you weren't too bad." And then he banged his fist on the piano keys in a black, unleashed rage. "Damn you—you've got the voice—you've got something that's rarer than a lovely voice. And they're making a meal ticket out of you. They're cannibals. Three years from now—what will be left? A worn-out voice—a tired face—a temperament that's played itself out in stale and stupid tricks. You'll be finished. Perhaps you'll have saved something out of the joy-ride. What'll that do for you? You'll know in your heart of hearts what you've done. You won't forgive yourself. You'll crave for the limelight as a sick man craves for dope. You'll dye that red head of yours and pile on the paint and take to drinking too much and cheap and greedy men—"

She tried to laugh.

"Sounds pretty." She added, "How did you know my hair was red?"

"It had to be." He sounded almost sullen. "Besides, I asked."

"Did you ask if I was pretty?"

" Yes."

" What did they tell you ? "

" They said you were—in a tough way."

" I am tough," she said. " Tough things don't wear out that easy." She asked after a moment, " What shall I do, Nick ? "

" Get out. Just as soon as your contract lets you. On the crest of the wave. Leave 'em panting and hungry and guessing. Learn everything you need to learn to be what you can be—a real star in the firmament—not just a burnt-out squib on a rubbish heap."

" Perhaps that's all I'm fit to be."

" Then I've wasted my time—"

" Is that what you want ? "

He slammed down the piano lid.

" Hell, no—what do I care ? "

" But if someone cared—? "

" They'd tell you what I've told you."

" Thank you," she said simply and humbly.

Mick had stood up and rested his head on the man's knee and his hand stroked the long muzzle, gently, giving comfort and perhaps seeking it.

" I shouldn't have broken loose like that," he said. " It's none of my business. But I hate good things to be misused and broken. Besides—I've liked working with you. You've never been sorry for me. You've never said, ' Poor devil.' "

He glanced towards her as though he were trying hard to see her.

" You didn't, did you ? "

" Never. I've never been sorry for anyone—not even me."

She boasted, " No one's ever seen me cry."

" I never shall." His fleeting embittered grin just missed her face like an ill-aimed blow.

" Haven't you ever cried ? "

" Sure. Once. When my nice girl got tired of leading me round. I nearly finished what that Jap began. But then there was Mick. He'd taken me on as his life's job. He counted on me doing my bit." He pulled the dog's obedient head closer to him. " Mine's a dog's life—literally. It's queer—but you can't run out on a dog. A faith like that has you by the throat—" He stood up, laying hold of the stiff harness. " We haven't rehearsed much. But you don't need it. You know your stuff. They've given me a box seat for the first night so that I can take Mick along. We'll be hearing you—"

" When I sing ' You can bet your heart on me,' ask Mick not to howl."

" Those aren't the words," he said sharply.

" I made them up. I think they're a nice— I'm sick of doing all the betting."

" Why should Mick howl ? " he asked.

" He hates me."

" He knows that you've no use for him."

" That's not true. It's just that—well, I'm jealous, I suppose. No one's ever cared about me like he cares for you—or you for him."

His face was averted. But she could see the hot blood rising in his neck.

" As a matter of fact, he thinks as I do. He thinks you're good."

He held out his hand almost directly to her and she took it. It was the first time that they had touched each other. He pulled himself gently but resolutely free. In a minute the two of them would be gone together. There was nothing she could do. He was back in his tower—his safe place—and it was too strong for her. Perhaps if she could have gone out with colours flying and all her armament she could have battered her way in. But she was locked fast in her own toughness.

" Thanks for coming," she said.

" You don't have to thank—" He added roughly, " I'm paid to put the animals through the hoops."

He turned away and she watched helplessly. They looked so alone—so isolated—— But they weren't. They had each other. They needed no one. Then she saw something strange and frightening. It was as though Mick had suddenly lost all confidence—all certainty. It was not the outer door they blundered against, but the door of the vestibule cupboard which the man pulled open. She watched, frozen by a sick horror. For grotesquely caught in the forest of hanging coats he fought, in a sort of panic, to free himself. The dog lay cringing and whining at his feet.

" Nick—what's wrong—what happened ? "

He turned at last. And now she saw the scars clearly—criss-crossed and red on the white and ravaged face.

" He's growing old," he said. " He's going blind, too."

" Oh, Nick—"

" I—I've guessed for a long time. Little things—little mistakes he made. He was so frightfully ashamed. Oh, he's not really finished. Another man's dog could lie in the sun— But he's my dog —a blind man's dog. He has to be young and alert. They'll take him away from me. They'll put him down, as the saying goes. They'll give me another dog to take his place. That's the way life is. He's given everything— He's never played like other dogs—never lived like his kind or chased a rabbit over the fields. I've been his life. And now that's over. You give everything you've got and then you get a bullet behind the ear for thanks—"

He knelt down and gathered the dog against his breast. She

thought, *He's crying. There never was a safe place—for him or anyone.* Something had happened to her, too. It was as though a fist had cracked through her own defences, letting in a strong and rushing wind.

She came and knelt down too, so that the dog lay between them. She stroked the dog's sad ears till her hand met the man's hand and held it fast.

"No one's going to put him down," she said. "He can lie in the sun. He can chase his rabbit. Perhaps he'll never catch it. But he can try. Because you don't need him now. I've got eyes for three of us."

She said fiercely, "You're not asking me. And I'm not asking you. I'm telling you." She put his hand to her wet cheek. "I thought you'd like to know," she said. "I can cry too."

Slowly they stood up. She still held his hand. Then she put her arms round him. Her kiss was deep, passionate—yet it told how she loved him and how desperately she wanted to help.

He said with a last fighting bitterness :

"After all—you're sorry for us."

"Of course—for me, for you, for the whole cock-eyed world. But I love you. And I'm not a nice girl. I'm tough. I'll never tire."

* * *

AFTERNOON BREAK

In several old grammar schools there was a liberal rule that the boys should have an hour from three till four for their drinkings.

Sometimes the schoolmaster, for want of occupation, employed himself oddly enough. One day a visitor to the school, observing some deep-coloured stains upon the oaken floor, inquired the cause. He was told that they were occasioned by the leakage of a butt of Madeira, which the master of the grammar school, who had grown lusty, not having had for some time any scholar who might afford him the opportunity of taking exercise, employed himself upon a rainy day in rolling up and down the schoolroom for the purpose of ripening the wine, and keeping himself in good condition.

Author Unknown, 1860

GENTLEMEN'S AWARD

For a *friend* there was nothing Joe wouldn't do

by RICHARD STERN

PHILIPPA heard it first from Eileen Sampson, who lived next door. "You've seen them, of course," Eileen said.

"Them?" Philippa was sitting in the sun beside the pool, watching her young son, Thomas McCoy, scuttle about on the grass. Young Thomas burbled to himself. Joe, the McCoy cat, and Vincent, the McCoy monkey, sat at a safe distance. "Seen who?" Philippa said.

"Our new neighbours. Their name is Baker," Eileen said. "They've bought the Robertson house."

"That's a nice little house," Philippa said. "I've always admired it." She thought about the house, her eyes on young Thomas. "What's the matter with them?"

"Well," Eileen said. She lifted one plump shoulder. "They both work, for one thing." Her tone stated clearly her opinion of wives who worked. "And they have a small boy. He runs around loose." She paused and looked meaningly at young Thomas. "I don't want him playing with my Jennifer," she said. "And John agrees. And if I were you . . ." She left the sentence unfinished.

Philippa mentioned the incident to her husband, Tim, that evening. They were having their customary cocktail in their bedroom. "That's a fine, neighbourly way to behave, isn't it?" she said.

"It is indeed." Tim had a publicity folder in his hand. He waved it at her. "I got this in the post—" he began.

"She doesn't even know them," Philippa said. "And suppose Mrs. Baker does work. So do you. So does Eileen's precious John."

"Not John. He sits and looks important." Tim waved the folder again. "There's going to be a cat show, organized by the council," he said, "and my name was given to somebody as a cat lover." He shook his head, grinning. "Joe, in a cat show. Can you imagine the shambles that would make?"

"I bet he's a nice little boy," Philippa said.

Tim lowered the folder slowly. He stared into the bottom of his glass. "Who?"

" The Baker boy ! " she said violently. " Tim McCoy, you haven't listened to a word I've said."

Tim put the folder on the bed. " We'll start all over again," he said. He held up his empty glass. " Another ? "

" Not now. You go ahead." She sat there, brooding. " Tomorrow, I'm going to see if I can find him and see for myself."

" Good hunting," Tim said.

He went out into the pantry and mixed himself another drink. Then he went into the kitchen and heated milk in a pan and laced it heavily with dark rum and poured it into the white bowl. Cook, at the sink, said, " They've eaten."

" This is dessert," Tim said. He went out through the back door and called.

Vincent, the monkey, came first, cantering across the lawn and up the steps. He rubbed against Tim's leg and squeaked mightily and then settled down at the bowl.

And then came Joe, moving slowly and with vast dignity, his stub tail high. He chirruped.

" How'd you like to be in a cat show ? " Tim asked.

Joe chirruped again. He moved in beside Vincent and fell to.

The next day, which was Wednesday, did not even begin well. Tim cut himself shaving and bled persistently, staining a face cloth and a bath towel and two fresh white shirts.

" You would think that you'd cut your arm off," Philippa said. " Tim ! It's started again, and that's the third shirt ! " She dived towards a drawer for face tissues and stubbed her bare foot against the leg of the bed.

In the nursery young Thomas dug deep with his spoon and catapulted mashed banana past Miss Henderson's cheek and on to the wall.

In the kitchen, Cook, whose temper early in the morning was rarely serene, broke eggs into the frying pan, discovered in them bits of shell, which she endeavoured to remove with a fork. She broke the yolks. " They'll have them scrambled," she said, " and like it." And she snarled at Vincent who sat on top of the refrigerator waiting patiently for his breakfast . . .

It was after breakfast, and Tim was gone, and Philippa nursed her sore toes, and Miss Henderson, the nurse, wondered if the spot on the wall was really permanent. Vincent had long ago decided that he had taken all the abuse that a small monkey was expected to. Joe alone remained unperturbed.

He sat among the carnations, sniffing their fragrance, feeling the sun warm and pleasant through his fur. He saw a small grubby

boy on skates approach the driveway and pause, almost fearfully. Then the boy skated up the driveway.

Joe stood up. He chirruped. He trotted forth, and the small boy saw him and skated eagerly across the lawn. They sat down together.

" I missed you," the boy said. " I waited an' waited, but you didn't come."

Joe's expression was grave. He twitched his whiskers and thrust out his big head. The boy's fingers scratched gently behind Joe's ears.

" I brought you somep'n." He burrowed in his pocket and brought out a piece of cold and greasy mutton wrapped in brown paper. He unwrapped it carefully.

" Dinner last night," he said. " It was good."

He proffered it hopefully, and his face, beneath the camouflage of dirt, was tense and eager.

Joe eyed the gift. He tested it with his nose. His whiskers twinked in horror. And then, with the air of a man unable to let a friend down, he fell to and devoured the thing, which took more than a bit of doing. He got it down at last. He swallowed four or five times to make sure. Then he set up a small purr, a poor feeble thing indeed, but sufficient for the purpose. The boy's eyes glowed. He patted Joe's head. He dug his fingers into the thick fur on Joe's shoulders, felt the heavy muscles beneath. The purr rumbled and throbbed.

" Golly, you're big an' strong," the boy said. And there was no mistaking the awe, the worship in his tone. Joe's purr rumbled like thunder high in the mountains. His chest seemed to swell. He lifted one great forepaw and then the other in a small dance of delight. It was then that Cook, on the way to the dustbin, hove into sight.

Cook had just finished paying for her error in venting her morning temper upon Vincent. Thrice she had thwarted his efforts at retaliation. She had driven him from the kitchen, relaxed her vigilance for only a moment, and then, unknowing, had shut him in the refrigerator. Cook's mood was savage. She saw the small boy and the tracks his skates had made on the lawn.

" You ! " she said. " What're you doing here ? "

The small boy looked up, but he didn't say anything.

" You've no business here," Cook said. " Go home." She stared at the small dirty face, at the shaggy hair. " If you have a home. Go on ! "

Joe stood up. His purrs had ceased. He looked at Cook. His big head lowered and his whiskers tucked themselves flat against his cheeks. His stub tail twitched. He stared, unblinking,

and deep in his chest a new sound began, a sound which Cook had heard before.

Cook's day seemed destined to end in frustration.

" Well," she said, " he's no business here."

Joe took one slow step forward. Cook stepped back.

" All right," she said, and her voice slid a little up the scale towards falsetto. " All right, but you'll see. I'll tell the missis, an' then you'll see." She turned abruptly and fled for the house.

Philippa was in the bedroom when Tim came home that night. He gave her her cocktail, and he kissed her, and then he sat down on the edge of his bed.

" What's up ? " he said. " Cook—"

" Eileen was right," Philippa said. " I don't like to admit it, but she was right."

All day she had been brooding, the temper of the morning long since faded away ; and doubts—uncomfortable doubts—about the ethics of her behaviour had begun to plague her. Perversely, the doubts only strengthened the conviction that she had been right.

" I sent him away," she said. " He wouldn't obey Cook and I had to go out and tell him to go away."

" Who ? "

" Tim McCoy, you just don't listen ! "

" Oh," Tim said. " Him. The Baker boy." He smiled into his drink. " What did he do ? "

" Do ? Do ? " There was the rub ; he had done nothing, really. The marks the skates had made were not serious. When she had gone out to speak, he had merely sat and looked at her, stubborn and silent. Then he had got up and skated off down the long drive, small and shaggy and lonely—unbelievably lonely.

" He won't say anything," Philippa said, " and he's dirty, and—"

" Most small boys are, and if they aren't—"

She switched the argument to safer ground. " Do you want your son associating with—with just anybody ? "

" Thomas ? " He thought of young Thomas, on hands and knees, scuttling here, scuttling there, burbling to himself. " Oh, be reasonable."

" Tim, it's important ! " Philippa began.

" Okay," Tim said. " It is. I'm easy to get along with." He sat there, frowning into his glass, finding more here than met the eye, finding, as he had found so many times, that the tortuousness of feminine reasoning was far, far beyond him.

" I'm sorry," Philippa said. " I didn't mean to jump on you."

He studied her for a moment. "You look tired," he said. "Things are hard all round."

"Yes," Philippa said. "They are . . ."

The next day was Thursday. Cook set about making breakfast in a mechanical fashion, her mind filled with a depression which she could not explain. Joe came in. He eyed Cook warily, prepared for any aggression, major or minor. He watched her go to the refrigerator, take from it a small package wrapped in waxed paper, and go to the stove. He sniffed, unbelieving, at the aroma that rose from the frying pan. And then a plate was set before him—not his bowl—a plate, and he investigated it at close range. The evidence was unmistakable. Chicken liver. He fell to with vigour and enthusiasm, rumbling pleasurably to himself.

Cook said, "You might as well have it. It'll only spoil." Which was manifestly untrue, and Cook knew it. But she felt better, and some of the depression faded away. The picture of the small boy skating slowly down the drive—this, too, faded a little. "I suppose you could have some rum, too, if you wanted it," she said.

Joe came out into the bright sunshine. The world seemed pleasant. He sat down among the carnations, sniffed their fragrance, and began to wash himself carefully. Vincent came, bearing a grasshopper. He set it down and prodded it gently, and it took off in a magnificent leap.

Joe watched it for a moment and then resumed his bath. Vincent retrieved the grasshopper. He held it in his small hands and he jumped up and down, squeaking, painting vivid pictures of the sport the grasshopper would provide. Joe washed on. The small boy, his friend, with the worshipful voice and the friendly scratching fingers would appear—right here by the carnations where he had appeared yesterday. Joe, like most cats, distrusted children, but there were exceptions. Joe washed on and waited, his confidence deep and sure.

Tim had gone to the office. In the nursery, Miss Henderson and young Thomas were well embarked upon their morning routine.

Philippa came into the kitchen. "We'll have the chicken tonight," she said, "and—" She sniffed. "You're baking."

Cook's back was turned. Her voice was almost truculent. "It's about time."

"A cake?" Philippa said.

Cook rattled oven trays in the sink. "Biscuits. They've got little bits of chocolate in them."

"Oh," Philippa said. She studied Cook's broad back. "Biscuits."

"They're nice to have about," Cook said, and her tone asked

clearly whether Philippa wanted to make something of it. Cook's conscience itched unbearably ; she stuck to her guns. " Everybody likes biscuits."

Particularly small boys, Philippa thought. Her back stiffened. Through the window she could see Joe sitting in the carnations, and Joe's head was lifted and he appeared to be listening, waiting. It was a conspiracy. Philippa turned away and left the kitchen.

The small boy, Danny, did not appear.

Dinner that night was a quiet, sombre affair.

Tim said, " Where's Joe ? He wasn't about when I came in."

" He hasn't been here all day."

" Oh ? " Tim studied Philippa. He was frowning a little. Philippa concentrated on her plate. " What's the trouble ? " Tim asked.

" Nothing," Philippa said.

" Then why the martyred— ? "

" There's nothing wrong, Tim. Eat your dinner." First Cook sulking, then Joe disappearing, and then Vincent following her about all day like a lost soul, squeaking at her, demanding comfort and solace for his loneliness. As if it had been her fault ; as if there had been anything else she could have done. " Eat your dinner."

Tim served himself some chicken. He frowned at the dish. " What happened to the liver ? " he said.

After dinner, in the living room, Vincent clambered up into Tim's lap and sat there and looked, saying nothing. His small fingers plucked at a button on Tim's shirt.

Joe turned up for his breakfast the next day. He gobbled it hungrily, tossed off his rum, had a brief bath in the sunshine, and then, stub tail high, trotted off down the drive. Vincent accompanied him as far as the roadway, where the sounds of traffic and the distance between trees, and the vast, unfamiliar openness of it all were entirely too much to dare. He sat down and whimpered softly to himself. Joe, unheeding, trotted on along the pavement, past the house where the fox terrier dwelt, past the fat dachshund dozing on his front lawn, past the grand house where the two Siamese lived, pausing for none of these, pursuing his errand with single purpose. He did not return that night.

Tim woke up early Saturday morning. Vincent was sitting on his chest, and one of Vincent's small forefingers traced an intricate pattern on Tim's cheek and probed experimentally into Tim's ear.

" Okay," Tim said, " I'm awake. That's enough." He reached for his cigarettes and lighter.

From the next bed Philippa said, " What's the matter ? " Her

sleep had not been pleasant. It had been filled with strange, tormenting dreams: with fingers pointing at her; with images of Cook, her back turned; and with large trays of enormous biscuits going to waste. She lifted herself on one elbow.

Vincent stood up. He assumed his oratorical stance, arms widespread. He faced his audience and began his speech, which was long and sorrowful and punctuated by many pauses. He sat down at last and looked at Tim. "I suppose it's my move," Tim said. "Whatever it is I'm expected to do."

Vincent whimpered softly. On all fours he crawled up Tim's chest and on to the pillow. He huddled there against Tim's neck. "You all right?" Tim said.

"He's lonely," Philippa said. "He never comes in this early unless—" She stopped there. "It's Joe. Something's happened to Joe."

"Now, relax," Tim said. "Just take it easy." He threw back the bedclothes. "I'll go and see." He got into his dressing gown.

There was no sign of Joe. Tim called. He beat up the carnations. He went into the tool shed. He searched the lawn. He went back into the house.

Philippa was already dressed. "Tim—"

"Now look," Tim said. "This is silly."

"It's my fault," Philippa said. "It's all my fault."

"What is?"

"I warned you," Philippa said. She hadn't. "That first night, I warned you."

"I don't get it." Tim sat down on the bed. "But whatever it is, forget it. Joe'll turn up."

"He won't. I drove him away."

"Joe?"

"That awful little Baker boy," Philippa said. "He's probably got Joe."

"You don't know. Be sensible." But Philippa was already gone. And Vincent remained on the bed, a small huddle of unhappiness. Tim looked at him. "You, too," he said. "Oh, hell!"

Tim dressed himself and went in to breakfast. Cook set it before him in silence and returned immediately to the kitchen. Her voice drifted plainly into the dining room. "He's always in by now," Cook said, "squal—asking for his breakfast. I put out his rum."

"Something's happened to him," Philippa said. "Vincent was almost crying when he came in and woke us up."

"They always know," Cook said. "Animals, I mean. They

have a seventh sense, like." She added ominously, " And some people don't like cats." There was silence.

Tim put down his coffee cup. He went into the study and called Enquiries and got the number he wanted and called it. The phone rang for some time before a man's voice, sleepy and not over friendly, answered.

" Baker?" Tim said. " My name's McCoy. Have you seen our cat ? "

" Cat." The voice spoke slowly, with determined calm. " No. I have not seen your cat."

" Well," Tim said. He wondered how he had got himself into this. " I'm sorry to bother you. Good-bye." He hung up and went slowly back to his breakfast.

In the kitchen a new voice had been added. Miss Henderson said, " He used to come in and see us in the morning, too. He liked the smell of Thomas's baby powder." All past crises were forgotten. " Thomas used to look forward to seeing him."

Tim stood up and went into the kitchen. Philippa, Cook and Miss Henderson watched him in silence.

" Come on," Tim said. " I'll get the car out."

Philippa said, " Where can we look ? "

" The Dogs' Home," Tim said. " We'll try there."

Philippa said, " The Bakers. Those people."

" The Bakers are asleep," Tim said. " Or at least they were asleep when I phoned them. They don't know anything."

" Oh," Philippa's voice was small, indecisive.

" Come on," Tim said.

At the Home they drew a blank. The Home attendant shook his head. " Well, sir," he said, " if we tried to round up cats—" He spread his hands. " Dogs are bad enough, and they can't climb trees."

" Thanks," Tim said. He went back to the car. He started slowly for home. " Maybe he's there by now."

Philippa sat silent for a time. " Tim." She hesitated. " How did Mr. Baker sound ? "

" What the hell ! " Tim said. " He sounded sleepy. How else would he sound ? "

" I just wondered. Perhaps—" She stopped and sat up straight and pointed, catching Tim's elbow with her hand. " Look. The notice ! The cat show ! Do you think Joe might have wandered over—"

" And found new fields to conquer ? " Tim said. " Somebody's Persian ? Somebody's prize Siamese ? That would be the end." He pulled over to the curb. " We'll have to leave town."

" He wouldn't," Philippa said.

" Wouldn't he ? " He had his door open and he was out of the car. " Come on."

It was not a large show. Improvised stalls had been set up around the ring, and in each stall there was at least one cat. " Look at them," Tim said. " Good Lord ! look at them ! "

They were of all shapes, colours and sizes, each one sleek and haughty, beautifully pampered. They were sitting or lying, dozing or watching, thinking their inscrutable thoughts while their owners bustled about with brush and comb, with gentle hands, with small, delicate words spoken in soft voices.

" If Joe strolls in on this . . ." Tim said. He was almost convinced now. He shook his head. " Look at that fat Persian on the cushion. Joe would—"

" Tim," Philippa said, " don't look now, but there's Joe." She paused. " And the Baker boy." She pointed, and Tim just stared.

Joe was in one of the improvised stalls. He was lying on a piece of sacking, just lying, one forepaw folded and the other straight out before him. Around his neck there was a faded and soiled ribbon tied in a clumsy bow ; one loop stuck out rakishly behind his ear. He stared straight ahead, unblinking ; and Danny stood beside him, hunched over, whispering urgently, and patting his head.

In the stall to Joe's left was a smoke Persian ; in the stall to Joe's right a seal point Siamese on a blue satin cushion. Joe's attitude was that of a man at a charity bazaar, doing his duty by the community.

" Now I've seen everything," Tim said. He started forward.

" No," Philippa said.

Tim stopped. " What do you mean, no ? Look at him."

" I know," she said, and her eyes were very bright. Her hand was on Tim's arm, holding him back.

" Now, look," Tim said.

Philippa shook her head. " No. Wait."

The judges—there were three—were moving slowly along the row of stalls, making their inspections, whispering their conclusions, making their notes on small pads of paper.

They reached the seal point Siamese and they paused there. The Siamese stood up on his satin cushion, moving in an indolent manner ; made a complete circle, like a model on display ; and then lay down again and looked at the judges with his bored blue eyes. They conferred solemnly. They nodded their heads and made their notes and moved on.

Danny had turned. He was facing the judges, one hand half hidden behind him, resting on Joe's shoulders. He swallowed,

and from right across the room Philippa and Tim could see how nervous he was. One of the judges spoke, and Danny nodded and moved a little aside. Joe looked up from his sacking.

There was a silence. The three judges looked at Joe. Joe looked at them.

One of the judges said something to Danny, and Danny answered, and the judges and the owners standing around began to laugh. Danny shrank, almost cringed.

"Why, damn them—" Tim began, but Philippa's hand was still on his arm, and he made no move, just stood there watching Danny and hearing the laughter.

Joe stirred himself. He got to his feet, moving slowly, without haste, the ribbon loop protruding ridiculously from behind his ear. His stub tail was high, twitching ominously, and his head was lowered and the bunched muscles of his shoulders stood out in great humps. His eyes—even from this distance they were plain—gleamed like polished stones, unblinking, opaque. He swung his head slowly, taking in all three judges and the owners standing around. He made no other move. He crouched there, staring them all down, and the laughter died away, bit by bit.

One judge fumbled with his pad of paper. One just stood. The third judge half extended his hand and then thought better of it and drew it back in haste. Joe watched them as they moved quickly to the next stall and paused there only briefly and then hurried on.

"Come on," Philippa said. "He's crying. See?"

"Joe?"

"Tim! Will you come!"

Later in the McCoy kitchen Joe crouched on the floor, tucking into a bowl of milk and rum, lapping it up with a steady, practiced beat. Vincent, beside him, sat quietly, squeaking only occasionally, stretching out a small hand to touch Joe's great shoulders. Vincent was content.

Philippa stood to one side. In her hand was a plate of biscuits, and she was looking down at Danny, smiling a little, not minding the dirt that was on his face. She felt confused and a little embarrassed.

Danny looked at the plate. He looked at the floor. The tears, temporarily stifled, were very close again. "I wanted him to win a prize," he said.

"I know," Philippa said. Behind her, Cook clutched the rum bottle firmly and coughed with a thunderous sound.

"They laughed at him," Danny said. "He's better'n any of them, an' they laughed at him."

Philippa shook her head. She hunted for words, but words are sometimes difficult things. Cook coughed again and waddled forward and sweetened Joe's punch with more rum. Joe indicated approval.

" He's better'n all the fancy ones," Danny said. " He could of whipped them all, but he didn't." The biscuits were unimportant. " All of 'em," he said.

Philippa nodded. Her smile was easier now, and, somehow, her thoughts had got themselves untangled.

" Joe is a gentleman," she said. She saw Danny's head rise, and some of the worry was gone from his face. He nodded in agreement.

" But they didn't bother to find that out," Philippa said. " They just looked once—"

" An' then laughed."

" Yes," Philippa said. Her voice was soft, gentle. " Some people are like that," she said. She was thinking of Eileen, and of herself. " Here." She pushed the biscuits closer. " You're a gentleman, too, Danny."

Cook stamped over to the sink on her large feet. She muttered to herself.

Philippa said, " Perhaps your father and mother—" She stopped there, seeing Tim's eye upon her. " After all," she said, " we're neighbours, aren't we, Danny ? "

" I think I'll have a biscuit, too," Tim said.

* * *

READY AND WILLING

While turning out some old papers I found the following letter, received during the 1920s in reply to an advertisement for a cook. Only the name has been altered.

Dear Sir,

It is in the evening news you want a cook. Well I am a good cook having been born in 1895 *with a husband who is a sailor and* 2 *children. I can do all sorts of cooking and riseoles. Wages* £2 10 0 *no dirty work.*

Yours sincerely,

Maggie Murphy (married)

P.S. I can do other things beside cooking having had 2 *soldiers bileted on me in the war and willing.*

B.H., in *The Countryman*

FRAILTY THY NAME—

Woman was born to make hash of men's buzzums

ARTEMUS WARD, 1834-1867, *Piccolomini*

A gardener takes not so much delight or pains in his garden, a horseman to dress his horse, scour his armour, a mariner about his ship, a merchant his office and shopbook, as they do about their faces, and all those other parts; such setting up with corks, straightening with whalebones; why is it, but as a day-net catcheth larks, to make young men stoop unto them? . . .

ROBERT BURTON, 1577-1640,
The Anatomy of Melancholy

No?

These women all,
Both great and small,
Are wavering to and fro,
Now her, now ther,
Now every wher :—
But I will nott say so.

They laughe, they smylle,
They do begyle,
As dyce that men do throwe ;
Who useth them mych
Shall never be ryche :—
But I will nott say so.

MASTER HEATH, c. 1530, *These Women All*

Confession

"Brothers, by the journey upon which I am bound," said Kathryn Howard on the scaffold, "I have not wronged the King. But it is true that long before the King took me, I loved Culpeper, and I wish to God I had done as he wished me, for at the time the King wanted to take me, he urged me to say that I was pledged to him. If I had done as he advised me, I should not die this death, nor would he. I would rather have had him for a husband than be mistress of the world, but sin blinded me, and the greed of

grandeur; and since mine is the fault, mine also is the suffering, and my great sorrow is that Culpeper should have had to die through me." She then turned to the headsman: "Pray, hasten with thy office . . . I die a queen, but I would rather die the wife of Culpeper. God have mercy on my soul. Good people, I beg you pray for me."

Quoted in *The Art of Dying*
by FRANCIS BIRRELL and F. L. LUCAS

Epitaph

Here, in a grave remote and quiet,
Starved by a new "reducing diet,"
Lies foolish little Mrs. Skinner,
Who smiled to see herself grow thinner.
And kindly Death, when she had gone,
Reduced her to a skeleton.

J. B. MORTON, *The Dancing Cabman*

The Supreme Test

Before he could tender any more advice we were separated by two portly women in shawls, with baskets. Their conversation was about matrimony, and for the most part it was in Irish, which I did not understand, but every now and again they would break into English. One was apparently telling the other how her son had taken a liking for a girl in the town, "but when I says to him: 'How would she look under a cow?' sure, that finished him. He never threw a thought to her since."

ROBERT GIBBINGS, *Lovely Is The Lee*

In Reverse

The Devil, having nothing else to do,
Went off to tempt My Lady Poltagrue.
My Lady, tempted by a private whim,
To his extreme annoyance, tempted him.

HILAIRE BELLOC,
On Lady Poltagrue, A Public Menace

An Excuse

Treat woman with indulgence. She was created out of a crooked rib. Even God could not make her entirely straight again.

GOETHE, 1749-1832

Man to Man

The wife of whittling Deacon Phee
Was virtuous and wise ;
A paragon, indeed, was she,
Adept in all housewifery
From moths to mutton pies.

Besides, Meg ran the Ladies' Aid,
And led the parish choir ;
She met each challenge unafraid,
Without a qualm and undismayed
She helped the sick expire.

The deacon whittled where he sat,
Cross-legged, when day was done ;
He whittled this, he whittled that,
He tossed the shavings to the cat,
And puss enjoyed the fun.

One day when Meg was feeling low,
But wouldn't stay in bed,
She took a spell of vertigo—
She darted to, she darted fro,
Then tumbled over dead !

The women's platitudes were loud,
And redolent of paint ;
They vied in sewing up her shroud,
Her piety, they all avowed,
Would indicate a saint.

A crony brought his eulogy
When they had buried Meg ;
The deacon whittled, thoughtfully :
" I never liked her, though," said he,
And crossed the other leg.

KATHRYN MUNRO

Irreconcilable !

I am sorry to say the generality of women who have exceeded in wit have failed in chastity.

ELIZABETH MONTAGU, 1720-1800, *Letters*

POINT OF HONOUR

Hope of revenge — if tinged with justice — can sustain a man for years

by FRANK O'ROURKE

WE had ridden five days across the gently curving arc of a plateau that came from the mountains and fell away into the great valley formed by the Missouri's long bend. We did not notice the gradual change in altitude; it was a sensory feeling of change in air and sky colour and the rooty smell of prairie grass.

I admit we were a dirty outfit, but not so bad as to frighten the only woman we saw, framed momentarily in a soddy doorway before she slammed the plank door with a scream.

I glanced around and realized how gaunt and dirty we had become, and it wasn't difficult to understand her reaction. She was far from any town, and her husband must have been away when we skirted their yard; but most of all, I felt our growing anger had shown on our faces.

Billy McGrath rode like a cork on his bay, a small man with protruding ears and knobby knees. He could talk with the best of them and think faster than most; he was the scrawniest, the smallest, the mildest of us. He was the boss, which only proves that looks mean nothing.

"Frazee," Billy said, "you clean that rifle last night?"

"Sure did. It's the dust, Billy. Man, I'll be asleep when we hit the ground tonight."

"You won't," Billy said. "We're not stopping longer than to eat and rest the horses. We're riding straight through."

Frazee stared at him owlishly, as if wondering what sort of men he believed we were, to ride all this day and the coming night and part of tomorrow. Frazee said, "Then I reckon I don't need sleep," and hunched over in his saddle. He was fat without a fat man's grossness and flabby movement, small-headed, big across his middle and oddly blessed with tiny feet against his upper bulk. His fat was not the hanging kind; it was only a thin layer covering two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle. Frazee could lift a horse or kill a man with his bare hands.

We stopped after dark to rest the horses, eat a cold meal and clean the equipment. We went over the guns, swallowed our meal

and rode on through a black spring night. Big Joe and Miguelito growled bilingually at one another to pass the time, sounding for all the world like two wolves eager to exchange cut throats.

Big Joe was an angular man no wider at shoulders and hips than one of Frazee's thighs, sad-faced and stooped and pigeon-toed, helpless-looking and coldly dependable. He loved shooting, riding, and growling at Miguelito.

The Mexican was my size and build, of medium height, with the pleasantly wicked face of a betrayed cherub and the disposition of a mule, unpredictable unless you knew him. Miguelito and Big Joe had ridden together for many years. Insulting one another in two languages gave them twice as many word combinations to roll lovingly over their tongues. I had never expressed myself openly about these men, but in my heart where the little truths are secretly held they rank among the best. I could not explain if asked: it was the way I felt. Riding now in darkness, I listened as Big Joe growled a fresh litany.

"Miguelito," I said. "He called you that name once today. He must be running dry of good words, eh?"

"Ho," he chuckled. "And I am only beginning to warm my tongue, Trent. Listen to me blister this cactus plant while he draws breath."

"I've got him licked," Big Joe said. "I'm three thousand words ahead of him."

"Listen," Billy said quietly. "Waste all the words you want to, but don't waste your strength, you hear?"

"*Bueno*," Miguelito said. "It is just for the laughter inside, Billy. So cold a night makes a man warm himself within his skin with whatever he has in his heart."

We rode in silence until dawn, stopped for food and water, washed our faces in a small spring, and urged the horses on. I was swaying in my saddle before the day ended, but I stuck it out. So did the others. I think we would all have dropped over if one had, but nobody wanted to be the first weakling. We turned one last corner in a narrow canyon and there was the cabin, almost hidden beneath the overhanging wall, with the fresh horses eating hay under the cottonwood trees behind the cabin.

Billy said, "Get down," and we dismounted stiffly and saw the thick-faced man come from the cabin, nod to Billy and take our horses. We had ridden six hundred miles, with short stops, when Billy said, "Get down," and it seemed as if all memory of that ride had been erased from my mind.

The man's name was Casey. He appraised us quickly when he returned from staking out our horses, and motioned to the cabin. "Food's ready," he said.

Billy said, " We'll eat," and led us into the cabin. I came last, following Casey, and was surprised at his neatness. His cabin was the size of one small room, but clean smelling and swept and neat. We stared at the hot food, smelling the rich odours, and ate without a word. I knew why Billy had him at this end of the line ; whatever he was, or had been, he knew what to do at the right time. We ate everything, then Casey passed cigars, and we refilled the coffee cups and looked at each other.

" Good," Miguelito said. " Very good."

" Sleep now," Billy said. " Talking's no good when you can't see straight. Turn in, everybody."

I was asleep before I'd unbuttoned my shirt. We slept until the next morning.

We sat at the table, alert now, rested and eager, watching Casey spread a big sheet of white paper before us. Billy smiled faintly and said, " Now pay strict attention. This is the way we go in, do what we came for, and go out. Casey will do the talking."

Casey prodded the upper, north-west corner of the sketch, it being oriented for direction of compass as we sat.

" We're here," Casey said. " Ten miles south of here, along this trail, starts the Willow Valley. It's flat ground on each side of the Bent Fork River. Follow along on the west slopes of this valley until the Bent Fork makes a big turn and flows almost straight south. You'll see this grove of cottonwoods out from the river trees halfway up the slope. The big one is dead, full of crows' nests. Leave the valley here and ride south fifteen miles. You pass over a ridge into the valley of the Buckhorn. Eight miles east the Bent Fork joins the Buckhorn. A mile up the Bent Fork from this come-together is the town . . ."

His voice went on, telling us everything, moving across fine points and broad facts, an hour's speech before he said, " That's all. You want to go over it again ? "

Billy looked at us, singly, then all-encompassing. "Again ? "

Miguelito and Big Joe spoke together, " No."

" Nice and easy," Frazee smiled.

" I understand," I said softly. " But let me study maps, Billy. Just to be sure."

" Study them this afternoon," Billy said. " Tonight each one will repeat what Casey has said. Perfectly, each one of us. In between, you can pick two horses apiece."

Big Joe and Miguelito were already bending over the maps. I grinned at Frazee and we went outside to the trees and looked over the replacements. Casey had twelve horses there ; beyond them, in the thicker brush, our tired mounts ate steadily and grunted

with contentment. Throughout the afternoon, we took our turns at the maps and trying our horses, walking them, getting up, checking saddles and blankets, making certain.

We were at school for two hours that night. Each of us had his test and perfect was the only grade acceptable. Casey listened, Billy listened, and we talked. There was no need to repeat; we were all one hundred per cent. But then I knew we would be, and so did Billy. We were only making certain. As to the other part of the business, that which was going to happen within the store, that had been planned for six months. We had no need to rehearse our parts in that short play. We ate again, more greedily this second night as hunger asserted itself with vigour in stomachs that had digested food and were more receptive. Then we slept.

Billy woke us at four in the morning. We drank hot coffee and ate quickly, and went outside in a chilly dampness to saddle our number-two selections while Casey haltered our number-one choices, plus two extra mounts. Billy said, " We depend on you, Casey. Be waiting."

" I'll be there," Casey said gently. " Good hunting."

I watched the sky as we rode south; it was black when we started, then turned to a dirty washtub grey that tasted and smelled like rain. I knew we didn't want rain until late afternoon, but not even Billy had the power to order the elements around. All I could do was hope it held off until we were finished and had met Casey again; if not, we would have slow, dangerous going.

We didn't talk much on the ride south, following Casey's directions, Billy leading, Frazee behind, then Big Joe and Miguelito, with me in the rear; only rode and thought of the past and felt our bodies tighten as we trotted out the miles. We passed the grove with the dead cottonwood and its crows' nests, went on and came to the Buckhorn Valley, turned east and rode now under a dull morning's cloudy sky. We saw farms below in the valley, smoke rising from chimneys, a wagon and team labouring far down in the river bottom, dots of people walking ant-like in farmyards among the white dots of chickens, the waving squares of an early wash on a clothes-line.

A rich country, this was, but not for us. We topped the ridge at fifteen minutes to twelve and saw the farm described, and the town beyond, and the rivers meeting with the slow, timeless junction of eternity.

It was ten minutes to twelve. We rode into town no differently from a hundred other small groups of men heading for the railroad and tickets south, or going east for a good time in the cities. Nobody looked twice, nobody called, everybody went on about their business.

We came to the business district and turned up North Second and dismounted outside the Buckhorn Saloon, hitched our mounts to the rail, and went inside to line the bar and order whisky. The bartender smiled, false teeth forming this contrary movement of unwilling lips; it was two minutes to twelve.

"Where can we get new blankets?" Billy asked.

The bartender looked at him, eyes moving sharply for one brief moment. He said, "Right across the street, mister. Hemphill's store."

"Thanks," Billy said. "Drink up, boys. Let's get those blankets and get going. Thanks, friend."

"A pleasure," the bartender said. "Riding east?"

"In for some fun," Billy chuckled. "Be good."

We walked out leisurely and crossed the dusty street, dampened now by the clouds still hanging uncertainly above. Now we moved as we had planned so long. Billy pushed against the big door and entered first, with Frazee following, then Miguelito and Big Joe. I unbuttoned my jacket, and gave my holster on the right hip a last tug. When Big Joe was through, I caught the door closing on its heavy spring, and stepped inside.

Billy was already at the left-hand counter, asking a thin, unhealthy-looking clerk about blankets. Big Joe wandered off towards the right, looking at saddles. Miguelito slouched against the counter, a few feet away from Billy. Frazee was just saying, "Well, look at the churns," and walking towards that rear, left door. He stood beside a group of churns and I saw him glance through the two back windows and then pull at his hat. I turned halfway and looked down the street through the front windows.

Everybody seemed to be eating dinner. The street was empty. I coughed and dropped my right hand on my Navy Colt and played carelessly with my hat thong, my left hand touching it gently, inches now from my shoulder gun inside my jacket. I wondered then, waiting eagerly to begin, what they would say when they saw Billy.

"That sounds a little steep," Billy said quietly. "Is the boss around? We need fifteen blankets. Don't a man get a discount for that many?"

The clerk glanced towards that half-hidden office, and then said, "Yes, sir. I should think so. Let me call Mr. Hemphill."

"Is he busy?" Billy asked.

"Not exactly," the clerk said. "He and Mr. Johnson and Mr. Stanley and Mr. Rubabush are having a meeting." The clerk spoke as if Billy should know who all those "misters" were, and that it was an important meeting.

"Trot him out," Billy said. "We'll do business for a fair price. There's more'n one store in this town."

The clerk threaded his way between the aisles and knocked timidly on the office door. I saw Billy tremble all over like a frightened colt when the voice answered, " Damn it, what's the matter, Stevens ? " I knew that voice, too, and I murmured, " Go fast, Billy. Go pretty fast or I'll beat you to it."

The clerk repeated his story of the blankets. I heard a chair scrape. The door came open with an impatient, somewhat condescending bang, and the man stepped through into the main room, about one-quarter hidden by the harness rack. I saw the other three men within the small office, visible through smoke spirals, their faces turned with annoyance towards the door.

He said, " I'll take care of it, Stevens," and came into full view, his face changing to the pleasant, false mask of the hypocritical business man. " Yes," he called, squinting a little in the grey light. " You need some top-grade blankets ? "

" No," Billy said. "Just you."

The storekeeper straightened then, bigger than he'd been in the old days, broad and swaggering and arrogant, his face patted and shaved to a firm whiteness by a barber all these last years. He saw Billy and his arms stiffened at his sides.

I said, "*Bueno.* Remember me—Trent ? "

I don't know what he remembered, or thought of, or possibly regretted in those moments. He wore one gun on his right leg, half-covered by his nice black coat. But the coat was unbuttoned. He had not yet drowned all fear of the past. I watched his left hand and when the thumb went rigid, I said, "After you, Billy," and made my draw. I heard chairs in the office going over backwards and making what seemed to be a crashing sound. Two of the men came through the door as he drew on us ; they saw everything, and fanned out, diving behind the aisle counters.

Billy shot him three times before his gun was level. I shot him twice. On the right side of the store, Big Joe shot with both hands and turned almost immediately. The second man was accounted for, Miguelito had moved now, no longer lethargic, leaping down that side aisle and killing the third one, but only after that one had fired a wild shot. I heard the outside office door open and ran towards the rear as Frazee, standing now in the left-side open door, drew the sawed-off shotgun from beneath his jacket and pulled both triggers. Through the powder billowing back into his face, he turned and said, " He's done. No need to look."

Billy said, " I'll look."

I knew how he felt in this moment ; it was a few seconds to anyone else, but to him it was the end of those long months that had grown into years. All the years of searching and looking, hope never dead, but patience almost snapped. Whatever he had done,

whatever he might do in the future, those few moments were the best of his life. And of mine; and of the others. Billy walked through the aisles and looked down on them, and was satisfied. Then he came swiftly to the front door and said, " Let's get going."

That clerk had dived into the rear of the store. Now we heard him moving about among pots and pans and other things. Billy turned and said softly, " One more move for about two hours and you'll have company." The movements ceased. We went outside, without hurrying, and crossed to our horses. We were up and swinging down the street when the first men came around the corners, shouting at one another. One called, " Where's the shooting ? "

Billy pointed over his shoulder : " Saloon."

We cleared town before someone in that mob had the sense to connect five riders with four dead men and a frightened clerk ; we were riding fast on the east road and swinging off north up the dry stream bed before Miguelito, looking back, saw the first of many riders trickle from town, cross the bridge, and mark their advance with a tiny, growing cone of grey dust. Billy said, " Now we ride," and we rode. I hated to drive horses as we did ; but it was not choice ; it was grim necessity. We were undiscovered when we met Casey with the fresh mounts. The rain was still holding off.

"A good day ? " Casey asked, while we changed gear.

"A good day," Billy said quietly. " Will you be all right ? "

" Like a baby in bed," Casey said. " Go along with you."

We turned west and left him as he led the tired horses away to the east, down a long ravine. We reached his cabin in the rough country an hour before darkness. The rain, as if holding back for us all day, dropped from the grey sky. Now, with a million drops, it was busily engaged in wiping out all tracks. A man could ask no more of any friend. We ate silently and Miguelito went out to stand the first watch while we bedded down for five hours' sleep. Billy woke me for the last hour before midnight. He was shivering beneath his windjammer.

" Turning cold ? " I asked.

" Little. Looks like about three days of rain, Trent."

" Good," I said. " Turn in, Billy."

I buttoned my windjammer and turned my hat down over my ears and went outside into the rain and a rising wind from the north. I had time to think that last hour before midnight. I stood against the canyon's wet, dripping wall, beneath the cottonwood trees that were no shelter compared with pines or *piñons* and considered our position in the eyes of the law.

Technically, I knew, we were killers, liable to pay the extreme

penalty for murdering four of the outstanding citizens in that fine, growing little city. I had no doubt of our certain fate if they caught us; but then, all of us had realized that fact before we agreed to the ride. In so many ways that other men could never understand, or know, all of us had to come on this long ride and kill those men, and get away if we could. This was the only way to deal out our personal justice; and those four dead men had earned that justice six years ago. It all went back that far. To understand, you had to know everything.

In our part of the country, Billy McGrath was a cattleman. I was a cattleman, in a much smaller way than Billy, but his neighbour for ten years and his friend for fifteen. Frazee had been with me eight years. He came for a month to earn money to start on his own, and stayed on to become my partner. Big Joe and Miguelito had been with Billy for eight years. We were bound together by ties of friendship before it happened and, when we met at Billy's ranch after it was over, by something that ignored time and distance.

Their names are not important. They were changed, of course, in Bent Fork. Hemphill was not his name when we knew him in our country; but that doesn't matter. He was the leader of the four, and they came to Flat River soon after the silver strike and the subsequent rush. One opened a saloon, one a store, two started a bank. That was seven years ago.

Their idea wasn't new, but in such a town, grown within a year from three hundred to ten thousand, anything crude would work if the men behind it had guts or patience. They didn't have guts, but they had money and patience.

Everyone had money in the bank. And the mines, by then shaken down from the original finders into the hands of a few big outfits, were finally trusting their cash shipments to the bank, for deposit before pay days. The four men waited for the biggest shipment of cash that ever came in under heavy guard. The next morning, just before dawn, eight men robbed the bank. It was a nice clean job and the men who worked it so smoothly got away with everything, firing only two shots.

The hotel was opposite the bank and a seventeen-year-old boy who couldn't sleep had walked downstairs and on to the verandah as they pulled out; they used both shots to kill him neatly. Their reasons were solid in their own way; he was the one person who saw them. He was Billy McGrath's son.

I remember the funeral. It was the second one I attended, carrying one handle for Billy McGrath. The first, five years before, was that of his wife. And then his son. Everyone in the territory was there. The bank, the store, the saloons, everything was closed for two days. The bankers sent to the West Coast for flowers.

After the funeral a twenty-thousand-dollar reward was posted for the capture of those killers. And then time passed and people forgot. But we didn't forget. Not Billy and the four of us, and a few others who were our friends.

The two bankers sold out six months later. The saloon changed hands about that time; and the store was sold a month after that. Men came and went in our country; nobody paid much attention. Not until Miguelito found the half-breed in a saloon two hundred miles below the border. Miguelito got him drunk and he talked. He didn't know much, just a few facts, but enough for the beginning. He had ridden into town and helped loot the bank that morning, but had not fired the shots. This he swore on his patron saint to Miguelito, who killed him soon after with his own knife. After that it was a matter of time.

It is foolish to repeat the hopes and disappointments and heart-aches of six years' search before we had the truth; and when we got it, gathered by a small army of people who worked mostly for nothing, we had nothing to go on. I mean, our proof would not stand in a court of law. We knew who they were, every one, down to the last horse holder and the look-out who waited outside the town. We found and dealt with four of the eight men who pulled off the robbery; one of them killed Billy's son, but they were not the men we wanted. We wanted the two who opened the bank; the man who ran the saloon; and most of all, the man who ran the store.

He was the brains; and he was the killer, more so than the fool who shot without knowing, thinking only of his own hide and the money promised him for his work. We wanted those four men; without them, the bank would never have been robbed and Billy's son killed. That was our logic, and I support it against any other, barring no court, no law of any land, no man who would say we were wrong. But of proof, actual proof, we had none.

We had found our four men, now living a new life with new names, in a small town almost sixteen hundred miles away. To all purposes, they were in another land. But we found them. Billy had a dozen men looking for two years—that final two of the six years. Casey was one of those men; and he was the lucky boy. After we knew, knew they weren't going to bolt and make us start all over again, we took our time. I should say, Billy took his time. He seemed to savour what was to come. He planned everything; it took months to work all the details out to his satisfaction. And we had gone through with our plan and killed them, letting them know why in those few seconds before they died, and now we were riding away for home. But in a different fashion.

I thought that night, going through the rain to wake them at midnight, how lucky I had been to stay alive long enough for my

own part in the affair. You cannot measure some things in any given way; in my heart I was right. I was willing to go through anything now, getting away, if only Billy could reach home safely. I knew three other men who felt the same way.

"Billy," I said. "Time to ride."

"You're a minute late," Billy said. "Or else your watch is wrong. Get 'em up."

We packed our light equipment, saddled and mounted, and headed west. We had that same ride of six hundred miles in six days facing us; and after that another ride, in different fashion, of more than a thousand. The thousand miles was not a worry; it was the six hundred that held the danger. I mean danger to some good people who might come up against us, believing they were upholding the law. I didn't like to think about that.

We stopped an hour before dawn and huddled together in the partial shelter of a lone tree growing slantingly from a bank. Within a few hours, even though the rain continued, we would be riding across that rough, rolling country. We had thought about it for an hour; all of us, I was certain, for our minds followed the same channels in such things.

"*Por Dios!*" Miguelito murmured. "Somebody shut off the heavens!"

"We want this rain," Big Joe growled.

"But I mean only over us," Miguelito said softly. "On all else, let it come down again as fast."

Billy chuckled. "Now listen. You remember that long ridge that runs west and a little north, right across the hills. I think we'd better split and ride on the sides. Trent and Frazee on the north, us three on the south. Every hour one of us will come on the ridge line and make contact with you two. That way, we stand less risk of running blind into a reception committee waiting along the way. If we're jumped, and trouble starts, whichever side it is, fire three fast shots. The other half of us will come a-runnin'. That suit you?"

"If Frazee loses his horse," I said, "you reckon I oughta saddle him up and ride him awhile and rest my horse?"

Billy's face was a white shadow in the slow-rising light. I saw his teeth against the quick, warm smile, and thought, for the first time in six years, *He's beginning to live a little bit again.*

"Sure," Billy said seriously, "but hang on tight. You'd need to!"

We needed that foolishness. It helped us ride into the rolling country and face the morning in a steadily decreasing rain that lifted its light mist and made observation plain for half a mile. We split

at the roots of the long transverse ridge, Frazee and I reining off and taking the north slope. On the hour, I saw Miguelito top the ridge, about a quarter of a mile ahead, wave once, and vanish.

" Better move along faster," Frazee said. " They're gaining on us."

I urged my horse on, increasing our movement, and the rain stopped. One moment it was falling in a thick, slow drizzle ; then it was gone and the first white breaks lined with emerald blue pierced the clouds in small, widely separated streaks. We would be riding in sunshine within three hours. The wind was coming from the east and the clouds were forming knots and scudding above us. I felt just a few shades above nakedness, as if someone had stripped my clothes away and handed me a sign saying, " Here they are." Visibility stretched immediately to all horizons.

" No good," Frazee said. " No good, Trent."

I pulled in to let him come abreast, and began tugging at my windjammer, stripping it off to roll and tie down. Frazee said, " Hold on ! " and slipped off his horse, and knelt on the wet, grassy sod.

" You hear 'em ? " Frazee said. " South of here—more horses."

I was out of my windjammer and turning up the slope. Frazee said, " Crawl up fast and see what it is."

We rode to a point below skyline and then I crawled, inched up to the ridge line and looked through the tall, wet grass. I saw Billy and Big Joe and Miguelito spread out in a casual line, ten yards apart, facing slightly south and west towards eight riders coming up at the gallop, waving and spreading out. They were abreast, in a wide line, and about five hundred yards from Billy. I pushed backwards and ran to the horses.

" Rifle," I said. " Eight of 'em."

We dropped our reins and ran for the ridge top, checking our rifles quickly. Frazee dropped and crawled ponderously through the grass. I veered off and took up a position twenty yards to his right. And then I knew that Billy would not give the warning. I think Big Joe and Miguelito had understood without words between them. Billy wanted us to get away if we could.

I searched the country to the south and saw no more riders, no more moving objects. I estimated distances and thought how this group of eight had undoubtedly come from the railroad a hundred miles to the south, had been riding north while we rode west, to establish a chain of watchers all along this section from south to north. The leading rider pulled up about fifty yards from Billy's flank and raised one arm. I saw his badge flash in the new sunlight

breaking through the clouds. My only thought was a silent thanks for clearer shooting. Their voices were distant but clear. I estimated the range at one hundred yards and checked my sights.

" Where you heading ? " the big man called.

" West," Billy answered evenly. " What's the trouble ? "

" No trouble, mister. We just want you three to come along with us, that's all."

" Why ? " Billy asked.

" If you don't know why, you're all right. If you do, then we'll have to persuade you anyway. It'll only take a day."

I knew immediately. That clerk was waiting to identify every wandering rider they brought in from their circle. He had seen Billy for sure, probably me, and Miguelito's face was unforgettable.

" Well, look," Billy said patiently. " I wish you'd tell us what all this uproar is about. We got a long ride ahead, mister. You don't mean we're under arrest for something we don't know nothing about ? "

He was talking as long as he could, hoping Frazee and I were riding on to the west. Every minute he talked, we were safer.

" You're not under arrest," the big man called impatiently. " Not yet. Are you going to come along ? "

Billy turned and looked innocently at Big Joe and Miguelito. " Doggone it," he said plaintively. " Did you two get in trouble that last night in Soo City ? "

" Not me," Big Joe said.

" Not that I remember," Miguelito said. " I think maybe we better go with these gentlemen. I'm cold anyway. Hey—" and he smiled at the big man. " You got a good drink, eh ? "

" Sure," the big man said. " Come on along. I'll explain while we ride. I reckon you know I'm sheriff of this county. These men are all official deputies."

I heard Frazee's breath go out of him in a long; angry sigh. He knew. They were going to ride south, twenty, thirty miles, and make a break. After we were safe. I said, " You ready, Frazee ? "

" Ready, Trent," he murmured. " Let me shake 'em up."

I said, " The big one for me, take the one on the end." I did not think, even then, of shooting an innocent man.

Frazee grunted and, as they waited below for Billy to ride towards them, I heard Frazee's deep, mellow voice break into one of his old songs :

In gettin' up parties, they take a great delight,
If things don't suit 'em, they soon raise a fight ;
They go get their pistols, they froth and they roar,
And sprinkle red pepper áll over the floor—

Frazee broke off suddenly and his voice roared down the slope : " You sit tight, you ! Lift up your arms and keep your eyes on the ground."

The big one wrenched his horse around and stared at the ridge line. The others were frozen where they stood. He was the one to discourage in a hurry. I hated to do it, but Frazee had stopped them for a moment and I had to follow up.

" *You,*" I called. " Sheriff."

I shot his horse from under him and watched him dance awkwardly from the saddle and land heavily on one knee. " Now," I yelled, " *up !* "

He raised both arms and stood helpless, looking at the ridge. They followed his lead. Frazee grunted happily and called :

" Lito, disarm those gentlemen."

Frazee was not using names. Lito meant nothing to these men. Miguelito rode round Billy, who sat motionless, and moved along the line, disarming each man. Finished, he spurred quickly to the left, out of fire line, and raised one arm which dangled belts and holsters thickly.

" Now get down," Frazee roared. " *Get down !* "

They dismounted, holding arms high, looking at the big man. He stood beside his dead horse, having no more authority now than the badge. Frazee called softly to me : " We'll take the horses and let them walk home, eh ? "

" Yes," I said. " Lito ! "

Miguelito nodded. I called, " Bring their horses. Leave them water, nothing else. They can walk to the railroad."

Miguelito and Big Joe got their horses and swung up the slope towards us. Billy stood and looked at them oddly, and then smiled. He said, " Will you listen to some good advice ? Walk to that railroad and go home. We don't want trouble with honest men. Just leave us alone, you hear ? "

Then he turned and rode away from them, and Frazee called, for the last time : " You can start walking south ! "

Miguelito and Big Joe passed between Frazee and myself, leading their horses over the ridge line. Billy followed, his face expressionless, and passed from their sight. Frazee and I waited, not moving, watching them hesitate and then turn away. The sheriff was last to go, reluctantly, dragging his boots through the tall grass. We watched them for half a mile and when the sheriff paused and looked back, Frazee put a single bullet over his head. After that, they walked rapidly and did not look back. We ran to our horses.

Billy said, " Good work."

" Listen," Frazee said, " you ! We are sort of dense, I admit,

but just you try one more stunt like that and we'll dehorn you."

Miguelito shook his head. Big Joe just grinned sheepishly and said, " We got plenty of horses now, Billy."

" Yes," Billy said. "And plenty of friends. Let's ride."

" No more foolishness ? " I asked.

" No," Billy said. " No more, Trent. I think we're clear now."

Frazee chuckled and sang one last verse when we mounted our new replacements and rode west :

Their bald heads are full of mischief and fun ;
They shine like a mirror in the bright morning sun.
Their shirts never see either water or soap,
And they have a strong odour like a poor antelope.

* * *

ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT

Most of the ghosts at this party are dear old friends, so you can ignore the slight chill in the air. Allow one point for identifying the ghost, one for the source and one for the author, making twenty-four in all. Answers on page 159.

1. *They were just three jolly sailors home from sea, but you might have noticed a certain peculiarity about their headgear.*
2. *Scoff if you will, but most people stopped eyes and ears when this monstrous apparition screamed through the night.*
3. *No solitary this. He brought quite a crowd of relatives along with him, and though they had not yet been born he had good cause to smile.*
4. *An extraordinary attitude for a lady and a ghost, yet hardly something to make a song about.*
5. *This spectre was so handsome in the moonlight that a lovely young girl was ready to run away with him. How lucky that he could put on flesh and blood.*
6. *To sit on a man's knee may seem bold behaviour for a ghostly young girl. But if the man were a very close relative ?*
7. *" Seven years dead and travelling all the time," he visited his old home with a message for a friend.*
8. *She never stops walking and sings as she goes. What energy for a child !*

GERTIE MACNAMARA

"Pizon?" said she. "Sairtainly, ma'am. Swift, meejum, or slow?"

by NUGENT BARKER

I CAN remember an old black mill, sir, stood hereabout; a pack of witches haunted it before my father's time. I don't suppose you believe in witches? Mr. Timothy Weem told my father that when he was a little boy he used to spend night after night in the mill, chatting with the witches, and waiting on 'em, and that the name of the principal witch was Gertie Macnamara.

It all come of his having to set out one evening with a bottle of barberry juice for his uncle Gideon. Gideon Weem used to suffer from the jaundice, and young Timothy's mother was famous all over Dumpton for her skill in medicine-making out of the sweet leaves of the barberry. Ragged clouds were running across the moon when the boy set out with the bottle; and as soon as he came in sight of the mill, Timothy thought to hisself what a wonderful night for witches. And those were true thoughts, as Mr. Weem told my father near sixty years later: for there was the mill door open, with sounds of swishing and droning and tinkling and gurgling coming through it; and when he peeped inside, sure enough, Timothy saw a number of witches riding about on their besoms, and others squatting and sewing witch-clouts among the rafters, and others sitting at table on the miller's flour-sacks, drinking dropwort tea, and eating henbane and witches'-butter sandwiches, and talking steeple-hats.

All of a sudden there was a deep silence, and the witches stopped moving, and fixed their green eyes on the boy; and one of 'em, who looked to be the leader of the whole pack, came over to him, with a swishing of skirts and a rattle of bones, and eyed him slap into the middle of his marrow.

Well, sir, Timothy thought his last hour had come. She'd a high steeple-hat on, and a cloak over her shoulders, and a smartish costume of some sort of tattery witch-spun material; and she'd got a monster sickle nose, with hairs upon it, and a monster sickle chin, with hairs upon it, and tufts of hair on her cheeks, and tufts of hair on her lip; and she'd got knockety hands, and clappety feet, and beadly eyes; and she was so straggle-toothed that you could see

right down her gullet into the fires of hell. She made a sign to the other witches, that they should stop whispering while she spoke to the boy.

" What do you want, young man ? " she crackled ; and he told her he was on his way with a bottle of barberry juice for his uncle's jaundice.

" A very sweet pretty complaint," said the principal witch, " and 'twould be a sad shame to destroy it. Therefore shall I and my lady friends breathe malignant curses into your bottle of barberry juice, and sour that evil linctus, and line the bottle with the tripe of toads ; and I shall drop a sediment of snake-stone within it, to lie in your uncle's tummy until the Day of Judgment ; and I shall stir the potion with a gecko's tail, and scent it with fitchet's breath, and I reelly don't know what more I shall do to the linctus—but I shall fill it with bubbles to give it a zest," cried the principal witch, bubbling at the mouth, and patting her back hair. Whereupon she told him that her name was Gertie Macnamara.

Aye, that was her name. Timothy Weem said so. He learnt a good deal about Gertie, that night in the mill. Her father was a pig-eyed nix from Achill Isle, and her mother was a lady's-maid out of Bayswater. When Timothy Weem was an old man, he told my father that you could hear the Atlantic Ocean thrashing through the wisps of her broom, and the Lunnon traffic rumbling in her innards. I reckon these sounds nearly scared him to death at first, for he'd never been to the sea, nor heard anything louder than Farmer Horton's farm carts ; but it warn't very long before he discovered that the witch was her mother's child, inside and out, and the mill nothing less than a droring-room.

" You keep quiet, young man," said Gertie Macnamara, " and you'll come to no 'arm."

So Timothy Weem kept as quiet as he possibly could, watching her party manners, and sure enough, he didn't come to no harm whatsumever. Now and again, it's true, there'd be a swish and a whirr in the open doorway, that made him jump on his flour-sack : but bless ye, it was only friends and relations dropping in on their besoms from beyond Sidlesham way, and Halnaker way, and Shripney way, and Chalder way—aye, and Timothy says, from Afriky way, one or two of 'em—for some small talk ; and some of 'em brought their sewing, and others spell-boxes, and others insanity-bags, and others brew-books, and one of 'em brought a little friend along with her, that warn't a witch at all, but a pigwidgeon. Sometimes, in spite of their party manners, they eyed the boy with the greatest curiosity ; but it was wonderful to see the power that Gertie had over 'em. She held 'em in the holler of her hand. Gertie did most of the talking, too :

"Bought a duck of a hat Tuesday," said Gertie Macnamara, "trimmed with toads' eyes and froth-hoppers. One-three, at Grimalkin and Hagseed's."

"You never!"

"Wearing it Witches' Sabbath," said Gertie Macnamara, "at evencurse. A cup of dropwort, Mrs. Itch-Weed?"

"Thankye, my dear."

"I forget—arsenic?"

"Two lumps," said Mrs. Itch-Weed.

And after that, young Timothy felt quite at home. He handed round the cups of dropwort tea, and he handed round the plates of henbane sandwiches. He went and climbed into the rafters, and watched Jane Weddle using her new stitch on the witch-clout, though she told him it warn't the kind of garment a young boy should see; and he helped Old Mother Speltbone rinse her washing, which she'd scoured in a flour-bin. And he was perfectly friendly with the whole pack of witches when Mrs. Itch-Weed and some of the other visitors got up to go.

"Well, so long, Gertie; pleasant nightmares. I must be off now. Sweeping a cloud-bank Chalder way. Goo' night, girls." She whipped up her broom, and one of her hairpins fell out, and Timothy told my father years later that when he peeped through the door he could see Mrs. Itch-Weed shooting away like a black rocket and sailing above the clouds in the moonlight.

"Proud as dirt!" said Gertie Macnamara suddenly, as soon as Mrs. Itch-Weed's back was turned. With that, two voices tittered in the mill; and Timothy noticed that besides Gertie, only Mother Speltbone and Jane Weddle were there now. Laying full length on his flour-sack, he listened to the three witches while they talked of their friends, and he watched Old Mother Speltbone as she hung her washing on a moonbeam; now and again a cloud passed over the moon, and the beam went in, and the washing flopped to the ground, and the sound growed so monotonous that Timothy shut his eyes and slept; and when he woke up in the morning the mill was full of daylight, and there in the road was an old cow mooing, and the miller coming to grind his corn.

Latish on in the forenoon, sir, Timothy Weem gave his uncle Gideon the bottle of barberry juice for the jaundice, and his uncle died at once in the parlour, and everybody said that Timothy's mother had lost her skill in making medicine for jaundice out of the sweet leaves of the barberry.

Time and often, Timothy went along to see his new friends after that, and the boy didn't come to no harm whatsumever. Ready to spring up at any moment to make hisself useful, he listened

to the small-talk of the witches. Not but what he'd hear much gossip, mind ye, bar Saddadays. On other nights, there warn't no witches in the mill besides the three that lived there—Gertie Macnamara, Mother Speltbone, and Jane Weddle—and they were such thick friends that time and often they'd go for a whole hour without speaking.

Timothy told my father years later how he couldn't hardly contrive to keep his eyes open, what with the silence, and the cronies lifting their skinny wrists in the air whilst they plied their needles up and down, up and down.

Then, come Saddaday, the mill was like a droring-room, Timothy said. A crowd of Gertie Macnamara's friends would fly in upon her, and Gertie, chatting over her shoulder, would pour out the dropwort and pizon it with arsenic in the busiest manner; and although she was purty well flabbergaisted, what with looking after everybody, seeing that they'd got their henbane sandwiches and dropwort tea, and trying to remember who was for arsenic and who waun't, yet Gertie Macnamara herself would take a hand at entertaining, whensumever there was a drop in the conversation. She'd squint into her cup of dropwort, and start to tell misfortunes. There warn't a witch could beat her at it.

"Tch! Tch!" she'd click, all of a sudden, "bless me innards'l *You're* going to lose a lot of pizon one day, Mrs. Itch-Weed! Well, I'll be bound! I *am* sorry for ye!" With that, she'd pat her back hair, and wink across at Mrs. Wilberforce, of Gizzard Hill, for she hated every martal twig of the besom that Mrs. Itch-Weed rode upon.

Them Saddaday night parties must have been rare sights, I reckon, especially when the sky was dark and scudding, for then's the time for witches. There'd be witches on the floor of Dumpton Mill, and witches up the walls; and Jane Weddle, flying aloft on her besom, would hang a witch-ball from the roof, and all the burning eyes of the witches would shine back from the witch-ball, giving the light of a centre lamp; and if so be the night was extra hot and airless, all the witches would begin to nod, and the witch-ball would grow darker, eye by eye, and even Timothy's eyes would close and his chin would drop on to his chest.

Then, seeing how 'twas, Gertie Macnamara would rap out loudly: "Lawk, girls! Wheer's yer manners?"—and with that, the witch-ball would spring into flame, and Timothy would jump to his feet and set about filling the empty cups again, and maybe Mrs. Esther Roadnight, the black-haired witch of Wittering, would start off, at a hem of a rate, divining by the dough of cakes.

Now, there happened to be living in the village, at that time,

a rare old feller named Dudley Gimp. He was a liddle chap, turning white, neat as a cock-sparr'. His wife owned a shop a mile from the mill, and when she died she left him the shop, which is what he had married her for.

That shop sold almost everything you could think on, and a dunnamany things you'd never think on at all, yet I suppose it warn't much bigger than a hen-coop, inside and out. 'Twas a hem miracle to all the Dumpton folks how Dudley Gimp could fish up what they wanted, without he tumbled the whole stock on to the floor ; and I shouldn't wonder but what he might have made a better juggler than shopkeeper, all said and done.

Well, sir, accarding to Timothy Weem, the women were soon running after Dudley Gimp, and none of 'em runned harder than Mrs. Pinkney and Mrs. Rushbridger.

Middle-aged they were, them widders, in a manner of speaking. Dudley thought a rare lot of hisself, I can tell ye, and one day he would let on to Mrs. Pinkney how she was the light of his eye, and another day he would let on to Mrs. Rushbridger how she was the song of his heart ; so it warn't to be wondered at that when these two widders woke up of a sunshiny marnun, each of 'em would say to herself—letting on that a customer had jest come into her shop, and was giving her the time of day—" Goo' marnun, Mrs. Dudley Gimp. How's business ? "

Well of course the liddle feller hadn't no more thought of marrying eether of 'em than he had of asking the Queen of Perjure to come and fiddle about with his bacon and firewood. Don't you make no mistake about that.

Now then. Timothy Weem used to go purty often to Dudley Gimp's, of a Sunday, and sit with the old chap in the parlour behind the shop, and one day he told Dudley all about the witches in the mill.

" You don't say ? " cried Dudley, thumping his knee. And so it came to pass that on the follering Saddaday the shopkeeper and the boy set out for Gertie Macnamara's. 'Twas dark and raining, and in the lanes there warn't a human critter but theirselves. As soon as the black mill hove in sight at the far end of the village, Timothy Weem could see witches riding across the patches between the clouds, and swooping down to the mill, and circling round it, afore they went in ; but to Dudley Gimp they warn't no more than shadders shifting against the sky, and Timothy told my father years later that folks can never see witches out o'doors, without they've seen 'em fust between walls.

Well, sir, to git back to my story. In they went, and Timothy done the honours.

" Ye've brought us sweetly purty weather, Mr. Gimp," said

Gertie, arching her wrist and smiling as she shook the shopkeeper's hand ; and then she told him wheer the hatstand was.

Well accardingly, Dudley whisked off his hat with the air of a markis borned and bred ; and afore he'd lived another moment he was sitting on a flour-sack in the corner, near wheer the besoms were stacked to drain.

The mill was crowded that summer night, and all the best witches had flown over. Mrs. Wilberforce of Gizzard Hill was there, and Mrs. Darlington, in all her finery, divining by shadders, by a suspended ring, by a balanced sieve ; and Mrs. Itch-Weed's cousin, Nellie Nightpiece, *she* was there, and Harriet Cowheel, the liddle pippin, and so was Mrs. Esther Roadnight, writing in ashes, and forecasting death and disaster by sperrits seen in a magic lens. They all had summat curdling to do, new bits of gossip to thresh to atoms, new-fangled pizons to consider . . . but to tell ye the truth, sir, Dudley Gimp didn't think very much of these women, he said to Timothy they were gollops.

Howsumever, the upshot of it all was that the old feller became a chemist, which is near enough to being a juggler, I reckon. He took to making pills and boluses, knock-me-downs, pick-me-ups, potions, plaisters, pizons, and tinctums.

Mind ye, nobody had any idea he was making these things. Leastways, not for some time, they hadn't. He didn't even tell Timothy Weem he was making 'em. He must have been months and months experimenting with his pizons and boluses, and the fust time Dumpton heerd about it was one spring marnun when Mrs. Pinkney and Mrs. Rushbridger happened to be in the shop together. It seemed to Dudley Gimp an opportunity too good to be lost.

" Lookee my purties ! " he said, all of a sudden, winking back over his shoulder. With that, he showed 'em a lovely bottle of syrup, and a lovely bottle of pizon.

'Twas all over Dumpton in five minutes how Dudley Gimp was a maker of syrups and pizons.

He had emptied two bottles of boiled barley-drops, and had washed 'em out, and in one of 'em he'd got the syrup, and in t'other he'd got the pizon ; and he'd labelled the bottles accardingly, and as soon as the women were out of the shop he went and stood the syrup and the pizon on the manklepiece in his parlour, pizon to the right, syrup to the left ; and next day, being a Sunday, he showed um to Timothy Weem, and told the boy he warn't in no hurry to let um go.

" I be too much of an artis'," said he. " Why, it took me nigh on a couple o' months to concoct they," said Dudley Gimp ; and with that, he stepped back on the hearth-rug and looked at the bottles like he was a mother looking at twins.

Well, sir, what did Mrs. Pinkney do but read a message in them two bottles? She reckoned that Dudley Gimp was trying to tell her how she was the syrup of his heart, while Mrs. Rushbridger was the pizon of his dreams.

Mind ye, I don't say but what Dudley didn't take a stronger fancy to Mrs. Pinkney than to Mrs. Rushbridger. She was better looking, in comparison. Don't you make no mistake about that.

She was plump and dreamy-eyed and the biggest lay-a-bed in Dumpton, and what's more she was parfectly content as long as she could speak alone with Dudley once in the day. Mrs. Rushbridger was the ezact opposite. She'd a bit of a wart on her nose, and mayhap that had summat to do with it. Howsumever, wart or no wart, Mrs. Rushbridger reckoned that she'd stand a better chance of happiness if it warn't for Mrs. Pinkney, so one day she thought how she'd give Mrs. Pinkney some of Dudley's pizon. Not much, mind ye, but enough.

Question was, how could she git hold of the pizon?

Well, of course, we can't look into a lady's head. But I reckon she figured it out how she'd go and have a talk with Timothy Weem, knowing that the old man and the boy were such thick friends. So off she started for Timothy Weem's; but on the way she found herself at Dudley Gimp's instead, with the shop empty, except for the old chap behind the counter.

"It queers me why you don't put that syrup in yer winder," said Mrs. Rushbridger, blurting it out. "And the pizon, too, come to that. Don't ye want to sell um?"

"All in good time! All in good time, Pollie!" Wheerupon, the little feller turned to a door behind him—the door of the parlour at the back of the shop. You couldn't tell door from wall. 'Twas hanging with brushes and egg-whisks and pots and pans, and even the door-handle looked as if it was up for sale.

When he opened the door, she got a peep of the bottles on the manklepiece in the parlour beyond. "There they be, and there they be as long as I want um to be!" he hollered out. With that, the little feller shut the door again, turned round, laid his finger alongside his nose, and winked at Mrs. Rushbridger across the counter. "Matter of fact," he said, "I've a mind to give um to my smart, fashnable friend, Gertie."

"What's that ye said?" cried Mrs. Rushbridger. "Who did ye say, Dudley? Gertie *who*?" But Dudley Gimp warn't going to let out anything further, so off she went, and who did she meet but Timothy Weem, picking sloes in the hedges.

"Mus Gimp has jest been telling me all about his ol', fashnable friend, Gertie," said she.

"Is that what he called her? Ol' fashnable friend? Why,

he's onny bin to the mill once," said Timothy, " and then he said she was a gollop."

" She's a gollop sure enough, I reckon ! "

" Oh, but she beän't ! " cried Timothy, " she's Queen of the Witches ! That's what Gertie Macnamara be ! "

" I don't believe there's sich a thing as witches in the mill," said Mrs. Rushbridger, scratching her nose.

" Oh, but there be, ma'am—a tidy lot of um, I can tell ye ! And Gertie Macnamara's the Queen of um. Don't you make no mistake about that ! "

Well, sir, Mrs. Rushbridger warn't the kind of pusson to let the grass grow under her feet. All day Saddaday and Sunday she thought it out, and on the Monday night she put on her best hat, and hurried off to call on Gertie Macnamara. The whole of the Dumpton sky was under clouds, and there's never been a better night for secrecy, I shouldn't wonder. There warn't no witches in the mill besides its reglar occipants. Jane Weddle was darning Gertie's stockings, and Mother Speltbone was washing cloaks in a flour-bin.

" Miss Macnamara ? Good evenun, ma'am," said Mrs. Rushbridger, coming to the point at once, " I'm Mrs. Rushbridger, and I'm trying to git some pizon for a friend."

" Sartainly, ma'am," said Gertie Macnamara. " Swift, meejum, or slow ? "

Well, sir, Gertie Macnamara warn't too pleased when she heerd what pizon it was that Mrs. Rushbridger wanted. " I've a chice of pizons meself, ma'am, and they all work," said she, droring herself up, and patting her back hair.

" O' course they do, ma'am," said Mrs. Rushbridger, " but how could I screw out of it if I was to use one of um to pizon my friend Mrs. Pinkney ? Ev'ry martal pusson in the place would want to know how she come by it. If I was to use one of your pizons, 'twould have to be given in secret, and there's dangers in secrets. No, ma'am, it's got to be as open and honist as the daylight. It's got to be all above board and shipshape, so as the whole of Dumpton shall know how the pizon got into my friend Mrs. Pinkney. And the onny way to do that," said Mrs. Rushbridger, " is to get a hold of this pizon from the shop of my friend Mr. Gimp. Besides," said she, " I reckon 'twould look better, coming from a gen'leman, than from a woman."

" I quite understand you now, ma'am," said Gertie Macnamara, " and it does great credit to your woman's heart, it does reely. 'Twould be a sad pity if the death of Mrs. Pinkney was laid at our door." So saying, she offered Mrs. Rushbridger a drop of dropwort, and Mrs. Rushbridger swiped it off without winking.

The two women set theirselves down at the dropwort-tea-table, and Gertie Macnamara, rubbing her hands backwards and forrards on her two nubbly knees, asked Mrs. Rushbridger what her plan was. Mrs. Rushbridger said it was the simplest thing in the whole world. It was only to bewitch the bottles, so that the deadliness of the pizon should go into the syrup, and the goodness of the syrup should go into the pizon.

"I knows ezactly wheer them bottles be," said Mrs. Rushbridger, staring into space, "you can see um on Mr. Gimp's manklepiece in the parlour. Pizon to the right, syrup to the left. Them liquids beän't the same to look at, mind ye, ma'am, and that's why 'twill be necessary to command um to exchange naturs instead of commanding um to exchange bottles. And when it's all fixed up shipshape and above board, I'll git my old friend Dudley Gimp to sell a bottle of his syrup to my friend Mrs. Pinkney."

"I quite understand you, ma'am," said Gertie Macnamara, nodding her head. "I knows the shop, and I'll git along there jest afore cock-crow. That bit of sarcery will be the easiest thing I've ever done—though difficult, mind ye, with it," she added, wishing to impress Mrs. Rushbridger. "Another drop of dropwort, ma'am?"

Now, it stands to reason that Gertie's repitation for sarcery had been the cause of many jalous fits amongst the witches of Dumpton and far beyond, and even her dearest friends would have given up their very besoms if so be they could only git the better of her without being discovered.

It so happened that Mrs. Itch-Weed was lurking in the shadders of Dumpton Mill that night—lurking for what she could larn in the way of gossip—and she overheerd the whole of this conversation. Well accardingly, she jumped on her besom in a trice, and flew off to Dudley Gimp's shop, and made her way, by sarcery, into the old man's parlour. The little room was black as magic, but by the light of her eyes she could see the bottles gleaming on the manklepiece, pizon to the right, syrup to the left; overhead she heerd the old chap snawing in his sleep; and after she had spat a curse she lifted her arms towards the bottles on the manklepiece, rattled her fingers, and chaunted out as follers:

Changed be the naturs of them two Bottles,
So Pizon cures
And Syrup throttles;
Thus do I beezle Gerts and sich breed,
Yours sincerely,
Mrs. Itch-Weed.

Thus the spell was pernounced, and there they stood a moment afterwards, a bottle of harmless pizon to the right, and a bottle of deadly syrup to the left; for I'll say this much of Mrs. Itch-Weed, sir, she was as good at sarcery as what Gertie was, though without the manner, mind ye.

Well, of course, Mrs. Itch-Weed didn't want to be catched out by nobody at the last moment, so off she flew to Appledram, wheer her people lived; then, jest afore the cocks began to crow, there in her turn stood Gertie, as planned and promised, in Mr. Gimp's parlour, with Mrs. Rushbridger sitting beside her to see that the spell was pernounced all shipshape and above board.

The old feller was still snawing overhead, and the little room was still as black as magic, and by the light of her eyes Gertie could see the labelled bottles gleaming on the manklepiece, pizon to the right, syrup to the left; leastways, that's what she thought, not knowing that Mrs. Itch-Weed had gone and beezled her; and after she had spat a curse she lifted her arms towards the bottles, rattled her fingers, and chaunted out as follers:

Changed be the naturs of them two Bottles,
So Pizon cures
And Syrup throttles;
Thus do I cast me venom purty,
Yours with love and hisses,
Gertie.

Wheerupon she patted her back hair, to show how difficult it had been.

As soon as Gertie had cast her spell, she and Mrs. Rushbridger went off into the dawn, little knowing that they had done the ezact opposite to what they had set out to do, and that pizon was pizon, and syrup was syrup, jest as they was afore Mrs. Itch-Weed had got going on 'em.

'Twas so arly in the day that no one catched sight of Mrs. Rushbridger as she stole home to bed. Laying awake, she listened to the birds and thought to herself how everything had gone off shipshape and above board; and fust thing in the marnun she called on Mrs. Pinkney, who was still fast asleep with the clothes pulled over her head.

"*That's* a nasty cough you've got, ma'am," said Mrs. Rushbridger, coughing as loudly as ever she could.

With that, Mrs. Pinkney popped her head out of the clothes.

"A nasty cough you've got, a very nasty cough indeed, ma'am. Didn't ye hear un?"

Well, sir, they argeyed it over and over, as to whether Mrs.

Pinkney had heerd herself coughing or whether she hadn't, while Mrs. Rushbridger got more and more flabbergaisted at the way things were going; but all of a sudden Mrs. Pinkney began to see reason, and grew as flabbergaisted as Mrs. Rushbridger herself.

"Why, by Job," she hollered out, "I do believe I'm going to die!"

"*That's* better!" cried Mrs. Rushbridger; and thus encouraged, Mrs. Pinkney sat bolt-upright in her bed, while her friend advised her to go to Mr. Gimp's as soon as she was dressed, and to ask him to sell her some of his syrup.

Well accardingly, Mrs. Pinkney began to pull on her clothes at a hem of a rate, and it waun't many minutes before the two women arrived at Dudley Gimp's, Mrs. Rushbridger looking as long as a doctor, and Mrs. Pinkney giving out the most leddy-like coughs you ever heerd.

"Can't ye do better than that?" whispered Mrs. Rushbridger. The shop was crowded, and that was exactly what Mrs. Rushbridger wanted. Old Mrs. Chiddle was there, and Dan'l Sparshot, and Flo Boyling.

"Marnun, Mr. Gimp," said Mrs. Rushbridger, over Flo Boyling's head. "I've brung pore Mag Pinkney along to see ye. She's got a cough, and wheer she catched it I *don't* know, but 'tis the fearsomest cough I've ever listened to, and I thought maybe ye might sell her an ounce of that syrup to drive un away." With that, Mrs. Pinkney coughed again, and Mr. Gimp put his hand to his ear.

"It don't sound bad enough to me, Mag," he said. "You wait ontil you're coughing fifteen to the dozen and a bit over. You don't think as I'd throw the stuff away down *that* throat, do 'ee?"

"Ye should ought to hear her coughing in her sleep," cried Mrs. Rushbridger, skeered to find that things warn't going all shipshape and above board; but Dudley Gimp only laughed and winked at Flo Boyling and reckoned how he wouldn't ever be likely to find hisself in such a persition, and with that he turned to Mrs. Pinkney and told her to come again when she had summat to cough about; and then a moment later, up went his eyes, and he began to chuckle and to thump the counter with his closed fist and to jerk out between his teeth: "Lawk, by Job, what a fool I be! 'Tis high time I had a swig of it meself, I reckon! I made it, didn't I?"

With these words, he put his hand amongst the pots and pans and brushes and egg-whisks behind him, and opened the door that was never there ontil he *had* opened it—and before Mrs. Rushbridger could make up her mind about the sitiwation, there

was Dudley Gimp taking down the bottle of syrup from the mankle-piece in the parlour, uncorking it, throwing back his head, and holding the bottle to his lips; and when at last Mrs. Rushbridger hollered out, in a tremenjous voice: "Lard a mussy, Mr. Gimp, don't ye drink that syrup!" Dudley Gimp was laying on the floor as dead as he was before he was borned, and a bit further.

Now, I reckon you think I've got that wrong, but I haven't. Everything I've told ye is true. I told ye that Dudley Gimp was a chemist, didn't I? So he was. He made pills and boluses, knock-me-downs, pick-me-ups, potions, plaisters, pizons, and tinctums; but he was a very *bad* chemist, which is jest the sort of thing ye'd expect him to be; and that there pizon was sich hem feeble stuff, it wouldn't have worrited a fly for two minutes or a bit under; and that there syrup was the most deadly pizonous liquid in the whole of Sowsex, don't you make no mistake about that.

So there 'tis, sir, look at it how you will, the story that Timothy Weem told my father years later only goes to show how plots laid by Itch-Weeds and sich like be no hem use against Macnamaras.

Now, there's jest one other bit I'd like to tell ye, before I goes home to my supper. Mrs. Rushbridger became a witch. Would ye believe it! Yet there's no doubt whatsumever that she was a borned witch. Out of admiration for Gertie, Mrs. Rushbridger went over to the witches, lock, stock, and barr'l.

She chose a night when the mill was humming like a beehive and the witch-ball was almost busting with eye-light. Mrs. Darlington was there, and Mrs. Esther Roadnight, the black-haired witch of Wittering, and Nellie Nightpiece, *she* was there, and Harriet Cowheel too, the liddle pippin; and so was Mrs. Wilberforce of Gizzard Hill, divining by a cock picking up grains; and in the middle of 'em all were Mother Speltbone and Jane Weddle, plying their needles, lifting their skinny wrists in the air, up and down, up and down.

* * *

ACROSTIC

Nuts! A Government Department recently issued the following order to greengrocers:—

"In the Nuts (Unground) (Other than Groundnuts) Order, the expression Nuts shall have reference to such nuts, other than groundnuts as would, but for this amending Order, not qualify as Nuts (Unground) (Other than Groundnuts) by reason of their being Nuts (Unground)."

From the Coffee Board of Kenya's monthly Bulletin

FOG HORN

From a thousand miles at sea, and from twenty miles deep, something heard—and answered

by RAY BRADBURY

OUT there in the cold water, far from land, we waited every night for the coming of the fog, and it came, and we oiled the brass machinery and lit the fog-light, up in the stone tower. Feeling like two birds in the grey sky, McDunn and I sent the light touching out, red then white, then red again, to eye the lonely ships. And if they did not see our light, then there was always our Voice, the great deep cry of our Fog Horn shuddering through the rags of mist to startle the gulls away like packs of scattered cards, and make the waves turn high and foam.

" It's a lonely life, but you're used to it now, aren't you ? " asked McDunn.

" Yes," I said. " You're a good talker, thank the Lord."

" Well, it's your turn on land tomorrow," he said, smiling, " to dance the ladies and drink gin."

" What do you think, McDunn, when I leave you out here alone ? "

" On the mysteries of the sea."

McDunn lit his pipe. It was a quarter past seven of a cold November evening, the heat on, the light switching its tail in two hundred directions, the Fog Horn bumbling in the high throat of the tower. There wasn't a town for a hundred miles down the coast, just a road which came lonely through dead country to the sea, with few cars on it, a stretch of two miles of cold water out to our rock, and very few ships.

" The mysteries of the sea," said McDunn thoughtfully. " You know, the ocean's the biggest damned snowflake ever. It rolls and swells a thousand shapes and colours, no two alike. Strange.

" One night, years ago, I was here alone when all the fish of the sea surfaced out there. Something made them swim in and lie in the Bay, sort of trembling and staring up at the tower light going red, white, red, white across them so I could see their funny eyes. I turned cold. They were like a big peacock's tail, moving out there until midnight. Then, without so much as a sound, they slipped away, the million of them was gone.

" I kind of think maybe, in some sort of way they came all those

miles to worship. Strange. But think how the tower must look to them, standing seventy feet above the water, the God-light flashing out from it, and the tower declaring itself with a monster voice. They never came back, those fish, but don't you think for a while they thought they were in the Presence ? "

I shivered. I looked out at the long grey lawn of the sea, stretching away into nothing and nowhere.

" Oh, the sea's full." McDunn lit a cigarette nervously, blinking. He had been nervous all day and hadn't said why. " For all our engines and so-called submarines it'll be ten thousand centuries before we set foot on the real bottom of the sunken lands, in the fairy kingdoms there, and know *real* terror. Think of it, it's still the year 300,000 Before Christ down under there. While we've paraded around with trumpets lopping off each other's countries and heads, they've been living beneath the sea twelve miles deep and cold in a Time as old as the beard of a comet."

" Yes, it's an old world."

" Come on. I've got something special I've been saving up to tell you."

We ascended the eighty steps, talking and taking our time. At the top, McDunn switched off the room lights so there'd be no reflection in the plate glass. The great eye of the light was humming, turning easily in its oiled socket. The Fog Horn was blowing steadily, once every fifteen seconds.

" Sounds like an animal, don't it ? " McDunn nodded to himself. " A big lonely animal crying in the night. Sitting here on the edge of ten billion years calling out to the Deeps, I'm here, I'm here, I'm here. And the Deeps *do* answer, yes, they do. You've been here now for three months, Johnny, so I'd better prepare you. About this time of year," he said, studying the murk and fog, " something comes to visit the lighthouse."

" The swarms of fish like you said ? "

". No, this is something else. I've put off telling you because you might think I'm daft. But tonight's the latest I can put it off, for if my calendar's marked right from last year, tonight's the night it comes.

" I won't go into detail, you'll have to see it yourself. Just sit down there. If you want, tomorrow you can pack your duffle and take the motor-boat into land and get your car parked there at the dinghy pier on the cape and drive on back to some little inland town and keep your lights burning o' nights, I won't question or blame you. It's happened three years now, and this is the only time anyone's been here with me to verify it. You wait and watch."

Half an hour passed with only a few whispers between us.

When we grew tired waiting, McDunn began describing some of his ideas to me. He had some theories about the Fog Horn itself.

" One day many years ago a man walked along and stood in the sound of the ocean on a cold sunless shore and said, ' We need a voice to call across the water, to warn ships ; I'll make one. I'll make a voice like all of time and all of the fog that ever was, I'll make a voice that is like an empty bed beside you all night long, and like an empty house when you open the door, and like trees in autumn with no leaves. A sound like the birds flying south, crying, and a sound like November wind and the sea on the hard cold shore.

" ' I'll make a sound that's so alone that no one can miss it, that whoever hears it will weep in their souls, and hearths will seem warmer and being inside will seem better to all who hear it in the distant towns. I'll make me a sound and an apparatus and they'll call it a Fog Horn and whoever hears it will know the sadness of eternity and the briefness of life.' "

The Fog Horn blew.

" I made up that story," said McDunn, quietly, " to try to explain why this thing keeps coming back to the lighthouse every year. The Fog Horn calls it, I think, and it comes . . . "

" But . . . " I said.

" Sssst ! " said McDunn. " There." He nodded out to the Deeps.

Something was swimming towards the lighthouse tower.

It was a cold night, as I have said, the high tower cold, the light coming and going, and the Fog Horn calling and calling through the ravelling mist. You couldn't see far and you couldn't see plain, but there was the deep sea moving on its way about the night earth, flat and quiet, the colour of grey mud, and here were the two of us alone in the high tower, and there, far out at first, was a ripple, followed by a wave, a rising, a bubble, a bit of froth.

And then, from the surface of the cold sea came a head, a large head, dark-coloured, with immense eyes, and then a neck. And then—not a body—but more neck and more. The head rose a full forty feet above the water on a slender and beautiful dark neck. Only then did the body, like a little island of black coral and shells and crayfish, drip up from the depths beneath. There was a flicker of tail. In all, from head to tip of tail, I estimated the monster at ninety or a hundred feet.

I don't know what I said. I said something.

" Steady, boy, steady," whispered McDunn.

" It's impossible ! " I said.

" No, Johnny, *we're* impossible. *It's* like it always was ten

million years ago. *It* hasn't changed. It's *us* and the land that've changed, become impossible. *Us*."

It swam slowly and with a great dark majesty out in the icy waters, far away. The fog came and went about it, momentarily erasing its shape. One of the monster eyes caught and held and flashed back our immense light, red, white, red, white, like a disc held high and sending a message in primeval code. It was as silent as the fog through which it swam.

"It's a dinosaur of some sort!" I crouched down, holding to the stair rail.

"Yes, one of the tribe."

"But they died out!"

"No, only hid away in the Deeps. Deep, deep down in the deepest Deeps. Isn't *that* a word now, Johnny, a real word? It says so much; the Deeps. There's all the coldness and darkness and deepness in the world in a word like that."

"What'll we do?"

"Do? We've got our job, we can't leave. Besides, we're safer here than in any boat trying to get to land. That thing's as big as a destroyer and almost as swift."

"But here, why does it come *here*?"

The next moment I had my answer. The Fog Horn blew. And the monster answered.

A cry came across a million years of water and mist. A cry so anguished and alone that it shuddered in my head and my body. The monster cried out at the tower. The Fog Horn blew. The monster roared again. The Fog Horn blew. The monster opened its great, toothed mouth and the sound that came from it was the sound of the Fog Horn itself. Lonely and vast and far away. The sound of isolation, a viewless sea, a cold night, apartness. That was the sound.

"Now," whispered McDunn, "do you know why it comes here?"

I nodded.

"All year long, Johnny, that poor monster there lying far out—a thousand miles at sea, and twenty miles deep maybe—waiting, biding its time; perhaps it's a million years old, this creature, think of it, waiting a million years. Could you wait that long? Maybe it's the last of its kind, I sort of think that's true. Anyway, here come men on land, and build this lighthouse, five years ago. And set up their Fog Horn and sound it and sound it out towards the place where you bury yourself in sleep and sea memories of a world where there were thousands like yourself, but now you're alone, all alone in a world not made for you, a world where you have to hide.

"But the sound of the Fog Horn comes and goes, comes and

goes, and you stir from the muddy bottom of the Deeps, and your eyes open like the lenses of two-foot cameras and you move, slow, slow, for you have the ocean sea on your shoulders, heavy. But that Fog Horn comes through a thousand miles of water, faint and familiar, and the furnace in your belly stokes up, and you begin to rise, slow, slow.

"You feed yourself on great slakes of cod and minnow, on rivers of jelly-fish, and you rise slow through the autumn months, through September when the fogs started, through October with more fog and the Horn still calling you on, and then, late in November, after pressurizing yourself day by day, a few feet higher every hour, you are near the surface and still alive.

"You've got to go slow; if you surfaced all at once you'd explode. So it takes you all of three months to surface, and then a number of days to swim through the cold waters to the lighthouse. And there you are, out there, in the night, Johnny, the biggest damn monster in creation. And here's the lighthouse calling to you, with a long neck like your neck sticking 'way up out of the water, and a body like your body, and, most important of all, a voice like your voice. Do you understand now, Johnny, do you understand?"

The Fog Horn blew.

The monster answered.

I saw it all, I knew it all, the million years of waiting alone, for someone to come back who never came back. The million years of isolation at the bottom of the sea, the insanity of time there, while the skies cleared of reptile-birds, the swamps dried on the continental lands, the sloths and sabre-tooths had their day and sank in tarpits, and men ran like white ants upon the hills.

The Fog Horn blew.

"Last year," said McDunn. "That creature swam round and round, round and round, all night. Not coming too near, puzzled, I'd say. Afraid, maybe. And a bit angry after coming all this way. But the next day, unexpectedly, the fog lifted, the sun came out fresh, the sky was as blue as a painting. And the monster swam off away from the heat and the silence and didn't come back. I suppose it's been brooding over it for a year now, thinking it over, and over."

The monster was only a hundred yards away now; it and the Fog Horn crying at each other. As the lights hit them, the monster's eyes were fire and ice, fire and ice.

"That's life for you," said McDunn. "Someone always waiting for someone, who never comes home. Always someone loving some thing more than that thing loves them. And after a while you want to destroy whatever that thing is so it can't hurt you any more."

The monster was rushing at the lighthouse.

The Fog Horn blew.

" Let's see what happens," said McDunn.

He switched the Fog Horn off.

The ensuing minute of silence was so intense that we could hear our hearts pounding in the glassed area of the tower, could hear the slow greased turn of the light.

The monster stopped and froze. Its great lantern eyes blinked. Its mouth gaped. It gave a sort of rumble, like a volcano. It twitched its head this way and that, as if to seek the sounds now dwindled off into the fog. It peered at the lighthouse. It rumbled again. Then its eyes caught fire. It reared up, thrashed the water, and rushed at the tower, its eyes filled with angry torment.

" McDunn ! " I cried. " Switch on the Horn ! "

McDunn fumbled with the switch. But even as he flicked it on, the monster was rearing up. I had a glimpse of its gigantic paws, fish skin glittering in webs between the finger-like projections, clawing at the tower. The huge eye on the right side of its anguished head glittered before me like a cauldron into which I might drop, screaming. The tower shook. The Fog Horn cried, the monster cried. It seized the tower and gnashed at the glass which shattered in upon us.

McDunn seized my arm, " Downstairs ! "

The tower rocked, trembled, and started to give. The Fog Horn and the monster roared. We stumbled and half fell down the stairs.

" Quick ! "

We reached the bottom as the tower buckled down towards us. We ducked under the stairs, into the small stone cellar. There were a thousand concussions as the rocks rained down, and the Fog Horn stopped abruptly. The monster crashed upon the tower. The tower fell. We knelt together, McDunn and I, holding tight, while our world exploded.

Then it was over, and there was nothing but darkness and the wash of the sea on the raw stones.

That and the other sound.

" Listen," said McDunn, quietly. " Listen."

We waited a moment. And then I began to hear it. First, a great vacuumed sucking of air, and then the lament, the bewilderment, the loneliness of the great monster, folded over and upon us, above us, so that the sickening reek of its body filled the air, a stone's thickness away from our cellar. The monster gasped and cried. The tower was gone. The light was gone. The thing that had called to it across a million years was gone. And the monster was opening its mouth and sending out great sounds ; the sounds

of a Fog Horn, again and again. And ships far at sea, not seeing the light, not seeing anything, but passing and hearing late that night, must have thought, "There it is, the lonely sound, the Lonesome Bay horn. All's well. We've rounded the cape."

And so it went on for the rest of that night.

The sun was hot and yellow the next afternoon when the rescuers came out to dig us from our cellar.

"It fell apart, that's all," said Mr. McDunn gravely. "We had a few bad knocks from the waves and it just crumbled."

He pinched my arm.

There was nothing to see. The ocean was calm, the sky blue. The only thing was a great algaic stink from the green matter that covered the fallen tower stones and the shore rocks. Flies buzzed about. The ocean washed emptily on the shore.

The next year they built a new lighthouse, but by that time I had a job in the little town and a wife and a good small warm house that glowed yellow on autumn nights, the doors locked, the chimney puffing smoke. As for McDunn, he was master of the new lighthouse, built to his own specifications, out of steel-reinforced concrete. "Just in case," he said.

The new lighthouse was ready in November. I drove down alone one evening late and parked my car and looked across the grey waters and listened to the new Horn sounding once, twice, three, four times a minute far out there, by itself.

The monster? It never came back.

"It's gone away," said McDunn. "It's gone back to the Deeps. It's learned you can't love anything too much in this world. It's gone into the deepest Deeps to wait another million years. Ah, the poor thing. Waiting out there, and waiting out there, while man comes and goes on this pitiful little planet. Waiting and waiting."

I sat in my car listening. I couldn't see the lighthouse or the light standing out in Lonesome Bay. I could only hear the Horn, the Horn, the Horn. It sounded like the monster calling.

I sat there wishing there was something I could say.

* * *

SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD

I think that I shall never see
A billboard lovely as a tree.
Indeed, unless the billboards fall
I'll never see a tree at all.

OGDEN NASH

CHANSON HINDOUE

Ye orient realms, where Ganges' waters run!
Prolific fields! dominions of the sun!

THOMAS CAMPBELL, 1777–1844

Bombay, Jan. 19th . . . The arrival of the Aga Khan, dressed in purple robes and wearing a green turban, was the signal for a great outburst of cheering . . .

The Aga Khan then seated himself on one side of a huge pair of scales while gold bars were piled on the other. There was much excitement during the weighing and loud cheering greeted the tipping of the scales by the weight of the gold bars. Later it was announced that the gold was worth Rs. 335,000 (£25,125).

THE TIMES, *20th January*, 1936

Street Scene

Motley crowds pervade the fetid mazes
Holy animals and fakirs saintly,
Brahmans, nautch-girls, beggars whining praises—
Dominate the scene. Anon some Yogi
Sitting tranquil as a god amazes
Isolated in Benares City!

H. KNIGHT-EATON

Verboten!

. . . Here, then, are the Maharajah's Court Musicians:

Five Veenas. This is a sort of off-colour guitar. As a decoration it is charming, elaborately inlaid with silver, resting on a green lacquered base. Played at a distance, in a high wind, it might soothe the savage breast, but it is hardly a thing to leave in the vicinity of nervous persons.

Two Thumbooris. This is a Veena that stands up instead of sitting down.

Two Mrudangams. This faintly resembles a drum.

One Tabala. This is really another Mrudangam; it faintly resembles two drums, one sharp and one flat.

One Flute. Of the Sicilian variety, sweet and plaintive, but quite inaudible when played within a hundred yards of the aforesaid tongue-twisters.

Two Violins. At least, they looked like violins. However, they were both fitted with trumpets. And there was one other significant difference . . . the strings were of wire instead of catgut.

It was the tact of the gentleman with the diamond ring that averted a terrible gaffe about these violins.

"You were wondering about the strings?" He spoke very softly.

"Yes. Why?"

He held up his hand. "Our religious traditions" . . . and his voice sank to a whisper, "do not permit us to use catgut."

BEVERLEY NICHOLS, *Verdict on India*

India

Thy changing kings and kingdoms pass away
The gorgeous legends of a bygone day,
But thou dost still immutably remain
Unbroken symbol of proud histories,
Unageing priestess of old mysteries
Before whose shrine the spells of Death are vain.

SAROJINI NAIDU, *Selected Poems*

Understatement

It was almost night, and the first shy breeze we had felt that day came from the Jumna. Across the river, through the twilight haze, a huge and swelling dome could be dimly distinguished from the dark sky behind. Soaring from the tree-tops into a bank of clouds, it seemed a Maxfield Parrish picture come to life.

"What's that?" I asked of Ahmed, my Punjabi companion.

"That the Taj Mahal."

Had it been the post office or the mission church he could not have spoken with less enthusiasm, yet it would be impossible to describe how deeply I was stirred by this casual reply. It was as if Columbus on his first voyage had asked Roderigo: "What's that dark line over there?" and Roderigo had answered: "Oh that? That's land."

RICHARD HALLIBURTON, 1900–1939,
The Royal Road to Romance

Running Commentary

Oh, there's them Injian temples to admire when
you see.
There's the peacock round the corner an' the
monkey up the tree . . .

RUDYARD KIPLING, 1865–1936,
Route Marchin'

To Touch or Not To Touch

Among the cushions on the bed sat the King smoking a cigarette. His legs had disappeared; they were folded up and tucked away beneath him, and only a small fragile body could be seen, sitting up erect on its base like a ninepin. How small, how thin he is! I thought, for I had never before seen him so lightly clad. He wore a fine white cambric nightshirt on which a necklace gleamed, and a claret-coloured silk shawl hung over his shoulder. His small head with its soft, untidy, greying hair was bare, and I saw for the first time his Hindoo lock hanging low down on the nape of his neck. Like a little monkey he looked; charming I thought. I advanced to shake hands with him.

"No! no! You must not touch me," he said, shrinking away. "Nor my bed," he added. Then he laughed at my bewilderment.

"Tonight I am holy," he explained, still laughing as though it were the greatest joke, "because I have had my bath, and no one may touch me. Did you not know that? You must always say to me when you come here: 'Is the Maharajah touchable or untouchable?'"

"I'm sorry," I said, "I must begin again. Is the Maharajah Sahib touchable or untouchable?"

"Untouchable," he nodded, and directed me to sit down in the long chair.

J. R. ACKERLEY, *Hindoo Holiday*

The Yogi

Sequestered should he sit,
Steadfastly meditating, solitary,
His thoughts controlled, his passions laid away,
Quit of belongings. In a fair, still spot
Having his fixed abode, —not too much raised,
Nor yet too low, —let him abide, his goods
A cloth, a deerskin, and the Kusa-grass.
There, setting hard his mind upon The One,
Restraining heart and senses, silent, calm,
Let him accomplish Yoga, and achieve
Pureness of soul, holding immovable
Body and neck and head, his gaze absorbed
Upon his nose-end . . .

The Bhagavad Geeta or Song Celestial, translated from the Sanskrit by SIR EDWIN ARNOLD, 1832–1904

HOUSE OF FLOWERS

"Please," said Ottilie, "tie me in the yard just like I was when you came"

by TRUMAN CAPOTE

OTTILIE should have been the happiest girl in Port-au-Prince. As Baby said to her, " Look at all the things that can be put to your credit."

" Like what ? " said Ottilie, for she was vain and preferred compliments to pork or perfume.

" Like your looks," said Baby : " you have a lovely light colour, even almost blue eyes, and such a pretty, sweet face—there is no girl on the road with steadier customers, every one of them ready to buy you all the beer you can drink."

Ottilie conceded that this was true, and with a smile continued to total her fortunes : I have five silk dresses and a pair of green satin shoes ; I have three gold teeth worth thirty thousand francs ; maybe Mr. Jamison or someone will give me another bracelet.

" But, Baby—" she sighed, and could not express her discontent.

Baby was her best friend ; she had another friend, too—Rosita. Baby was like a wheel, round, rolling ; junk rings had left green circles on several of her fat fingers, her teeth were dark as burned tree stumps, and when she laughed you could hear her at sea—at least, so the sailors claimed. Rosita, the other friend, was taller than most men, and stronger ; at night, with the customers on hand, she minced about lisping in a silly doll voice, but in the daytime she took spacious, loping strides and spoke out in a military baritone. Both of Ottilie's friends were from the Dominican Republic, and considered it reason enough to feel themselves a cut above the natives of this darker country. It did not concern them that Ottilie was a native.

" You have brains," Baby told her, and certainly what Baby doted on was a good brain. Ottilie was often afraid that her friends would discover that she could neither read nor write.

The house where they lived and worked was rickety, thin as a steeple and frosted with fragile, bougainvillæa-vined balconies. Though there was no sign outside, it was called the Champs Elysées. The proprietress, a spinsterish smothered-looking invalid, ruled from an upstairs room where she stayed locked away rocking

in a rocking-chair and drinking ten to twenty Coca-Colas a day. All counted, she had eight ladies working for her; with the exception of Ottilie, no one of them was under thirty. In the evening, when the ladies assembled on the porch, where they chatted and flourished paper fans that beat the air like delirious moths, Ottilie seemed a delightful dreaming child surrounded by older, uglier sisters.

Her mother was dead, her father was a planter who had gone back to France, and she had been brought up in the mountains by a rough peasant family. Three years earlier, when she was fourteen, she had come down for the first time to the market in Port-au-Prince. It was a journey of two days and a night, and she had walked, carrying a ten-pound sack of grain; to ease the load she had let a little of the grain spill out, then a little more, and by the time she had reached the market there was almost none left.

Ottilie had cried because she thought of how angry the family would be when she came home without the money for the grain; but these tears were not for long; such a nice, jolly man helped her dry them. He bought her a slice of coconut, and took her to see his cousin, who was the proprietress of the Champs Elysées. Ottilie could not believe her good luck; the jukebox music, the satin shoes and joking men were as strange and marvellous as the electric light bulb in her room, which she never tired of clicking on and off.

Soon she had become the most talked of girl on the road, the proprietress was able to ask double for her, and Ottilie grew vain; she could pose for hours in front of a mirror. It was seldom that she thought of the mountains; and yet, after three years, there was much of the mountains still with her: their winds seemed still to move around her, her hard high haunches had not softened, nor had the soles of her feet, which were rough as lizard's hide.

When her friends spoke of love, of men they had loved, Ottilie became sulky.

"How do you feel if you're in love?" she asked.

"Ah," said Rosita with swooning eyes, "you feel as though pepper had been sprinkled on your heart, as though tiny fish are swimming in your veins."

Ottilie shook her head; if Rosita was telling the truth, then she had never been in love, for she had never felt that way about any of the men who came to the house.

This so troubled her that at last she went to see a *houngan* who lived in the hills above the town. Unlike her friends, Ottilie did not tack Christian pictures on the walls of her room. She did not believe in God, but in many gods: of food, light, of death, ruin. The *houngan* was in touch with these gods; he kept their secrets

on his altar, could hear their voices in the rattle of a gourd, could dispense their power in a potion. Speaking through the gods, the *houngan* gave her this message.

" You must catch a wild bee," he said, " and hold it in your closed hand . . . if the bee does not sting, then you will know you have found love."

On the way home, she thought of Mr. Jamison. He was a man past fifty, an American connected with an engineering project. The gold bracelets chattering on her wrists were presents from him, and Ottilie, passing a fence snowy with honeysuckle, wondered if after all she was not in love with Mr. Jamison. Black bees festooned the honeysuckle. With a brave thrust of her hand she caught one dozing. Its stab was like a blow that knocked her to her knees; and there she knelt, weeping until it was hard to know whether the bee had stung her hand or her eyes.

It was March, and events were leading towards carnival. At the Champs Elysées the ladies were sewing their costumes; Ottilie's hands were idle, for she had decided not to wear a costume at all. On rahrah weekends, when drums sounded at the rising moon, she sat at her window and watched with a wandering mind the little bands of singers dancing and drumming their way along the road; she listened to the whistling and the laughter and felt no desire to join in.

" Anybody would think you were a thousand years old," said Baby, and Rosita said, " Ottilie, why don't you come to the cockfight with us ? "

She was not speaking of an ordinary cockfight. From all parts of the island contestants had arrived bringing their fiercest birds. Ottilie thought she might as well go, and screwed a pair of pearls into her ears. When they arrived the exhibition was already under way; in a great tent a sea-sized crowd sobbed and shouted, while a second crowd (those who could not get in) thronged on the outskirts. Entry was no problem to the ladies from the Champs Elysées: a policeman friend cut a path for them and made room on a bench by the ring.

The country people surrounding them seemed embarrassed to find themselves in such stylish company. They looked shyly at Baby's lacquered nails, the rhinestone combs in Rosita's hair, the glow of Ottilie's pearl ear-rings. However, the fights were exciting, and the ladies were soon forgotten; Baby was annoyed that this should be so, and her eyes rolled about searching for glances in their direction. Suddenly she nudged Ottilie.

" Ottilie," she said, " you've got an admirer: see that boy over there, he's staring at you as if you were something cold to drink."

At first Ottilie thought he must be someone she knew, for he was looking at her as though she should recognize him: but how could she know him when she'd never known anyone so beautiful, anyone with such long legs, little ears? She could see that he was from the mountains: his straw country hat and the worn-out blue of his thick shirt told her as much. He was a ginger colour, his skin shiny as a lemon, smooth as a guava leaf, and the tilt of his head was as arrogant as the black and scarlet bird he held in his hands. Ottilie was used to smiling boldly at men; but now her smile was fragmentary; it clung to her lips like cake crumbs.

Eventually there was an interval. The arena was cleared, and all who could crowded into it to dance and stamp while an orchestra of drums and strings sang out carnival tunes. It was then that the young man approached Ottilie; she laughed to see his bird perched like a parrot on his shoulder.

"Off with you," said Baby, outraged that a peasant should ask Ottilie to dance, and Rosita rose menacingly to stand between the young man and her friend.

He only smiled and said, "Please, madam, I would like to speak with your daughter."

Ottilie felt herself being lifted, felt her hips meet against his to the rhythm of music, and she did not mind at all; she let him lead her into the thickest tangle of dancers.

Rosita said, "Did you hear that? He thought I was her mother," and Baby, consoling her, grimly said, "After all, what do you expect; they're only natives, both of them. When she comes back we'll just pretend we don't know her."

As it happened, Ottilie did not return to her friends. Royal—this was the young man's name, Royal Bonaparte, he told her—had not wanted to dance.

"We must walk in a quiet place," he said; "hold my hand and I will take you."

She thought him strange, but did not feel strange with him, for the mountains were still with her, and he was of the mountains. With their hands together, and the iridescent cock swaying on his shoulder, they left the tent and wandered lazily down a white road, then along a soft lane where birds of sunlight fluttered through the greenness of leaning acacia trees.

"I have been sad," he said—not looking sad. "In my village Juno is a champion, but the birds here are strong and ugly, and if I let him fight I would only have a dead Juno. So I will take him home and say that he won. Ottilie, will you have a dip of snuff?"

She sneezed voluptuously. Snuff reminded her of her childhood, and mean as those years had been, nostalgia touched her with its far-reaching wand.

"Royal," she said, "be still a minute, I want to take off my shoes."

Royal himself did not have shoes; his golden feet were slender and airy, and the prints they left were like the track of a delicate animal.

He said, "How is it that I find you here—in all the world here, where nothing is good, where the rum is bad and the people thieves? Why do I find you here, Ottilie?"

"Because I must make my way, the same as you, and here there is a place for me. I work in a—oh, kind of hotel."

"We have our own place," he said. "All the side of a hill, and there at the top of the hill is my cool house. Ottilie, will you come and sit inside it?"

"Crazy," said Ottilie, teasing him, "crazy." And she ran between the trees, and he was after her, his arms out as though he held a net.

The bird Juno flared his wings, crowed, flew to the ground. Scratchy leaves and fur of moss thrilled the soles of Ottilie's feet as she lilted through the shade and shadows; abruptly, into a veil of rainbow fern, she fell with a thorn in her heel. She winced when Royal pulled out the thorn; he kissed the place where it had been; his lips moved to her hands, her throat, and it was as though she were among drifting leaves. She breathed the odour of him, the dark clean smell that was like the roots of things, of geraniums, of heavy trees.

"Now that's enough," she pleaded, though she did not feel that this was so: it was only that after an hour of him her heart was about to give out.

He was quiet then; his tickly-haired head rested above her heart; and "Shoo!" she said to the gnats that clustered about his sleeping eyes. "Shush!" she said to Juno, who pranced around, crowing at the sky.

While she lay there, Ottilie saw her old enemies, the bees. Silently, in a line like ants, the bees were crawling in and out of a broken stump that stood not far from her. She loosened herself from Royal's arms, and smoothed a place on the ground for his head. Her hand was trembling as she laid it in the path of the bees, but the first that came along tumbled on to her palm, and when she closed her fingers it made no move to hurt her. She counted ten, just to be sure, then opened her hand, and the bee, in spiralling arcs, climbed the air with a joyful singing.

The proprietress gave Baby and Rosita a piece of advice: "Leave her alone, let her go—a few weeks and she will be back."

The proprietress spoke in the calm of defeat: to keep Ottilie

with her she had offered the best room in the house, a new gold tooth, a camera, an electric fan. But Ottilie had not wavered, she had gone right on putting her belongings in a cardboard box. Baby tried to help, but she was crying so much that Ottilie had to stop her: it was bound to be bad luck, all those tears falling on a bride's possessions. And to Rosita she said, "Rosita, you ought to be glad for me instead of standing there wringing your hands."

It was only two days after the cockfight that Royal shouldered Ottilie's cardboard box and walked her in the dusk towards the mountains. When it was learned that she was no longer at the Champs Elysées, many of the customers took their trade elsewhere; others, though remaining loyal to the old place, complained of a gloom in the atmosphere: some evenings there was hardly anyone to buy the ladies a beer. Gradually it began to be felt that Ottilie, after all, would not come back. At the end of six months the proprietress said, "She must be dead."

Royal's house was like a house of flowers; wistaria sheltered the roof, a curtain of vines shaded the windows, lilies bloomed at the door. From the windows one could see far faint winkings of the sea, as the house was high up a hill: here the sun burned hot, but the shadows were cold. Inside, the house was always dark and cool, and the walls rustled with pasted pink and green newspapers. There was only one room; it contained a stove, a teetering mirror on top of a marble table, and a brass bed big enough for three fat men.

But Ottilie did not sleep in this grand bed. She was not allowed even to sit upon it, for it was the property of Royal's grandmother, Old Bonaparte. A charred lumpy creature, bow-legged as a dwarf and bald as a buzzard, Old Bonaparte was much respected for miles around as a maker of spells. There were many who were afraid to have her shadow fall upon them; even Royal was wary of her, and he stuttered when he told her that he had brought home a wife. Motioning Ottilie to her, the old woman bruised her with vicious little pinches, and informed her grandson that his bride was too skinny. "She will die with her first," she said.

Each night the young couple waited to make love until they thought Old Bonaparte had gone to sleep. Sometimes, stretched on the straw moonlit pallet where they slept, Ottilie was sure that Old Bonaparte was awake and watching them. Once she saw a gummy, star-struck eye shining in the dark. There was no use complaining to Royal, he only laughed. What harm was there in an old woman who had seen so much of life wanting to see a little more?

Because she loved Royal, Ottilie put away her grievances and

tried not to resent Old Bonaparte. For a long while she was happy; she did not miss her friends or the life in Port-au-Prince; even so, she kept her souvenirs of those days in good repair: with a sewing basket Baby had given her as a wedding gift, she mended the silk dresses, the green silk stockings that now she never wore, for there was no place to wear them: only men congregated at the café in the village, at the cockfights. When women wanted to meet they met at the washing stream. But Ottilie was too busy to be lonesome. At daybreak she gathered eucalyptus leaves to start a fire and begin their meals; there were chickens to feed, a goat to be milked, Old Bonaparte whining for attention.

Three and four times a day she filled a bucket of drinking water and carried it to where Royal worked in the cane fields a mile below the house. She did not mind that on these visits he was gruff with her: she knew that he was showing off before the other men who worked in the fields and who grinned at her like split watermelons. But at night, when she had him home, she'd pull his ears and pout that he treated her like a dog, until, in the dark of the yard, where the fireflies flamed, he would hold her and whisper something to make her smile.

They had been married about five months when Royal began doing the things he'd done before his marriage. Other men went to the café in the evenings, stayed whole Sundays at a cockfight—he couldn't understand why Ottilie should carry on about it; but she said he had no right behaving the way he did, and that if he loved her he wouldn't leave her alone day and night with that mean old woman.

"I love you," he said, "but a man has to have his pleasures, too." There were nights when he pleasured himself until the moon was in the middle of the sky; she never knew when he was coming home, and she would lie fretting on the pallet, imagining she could not sleep without his arms around her.

But Old Bonaparte was the real torment. She did her best to worry Ottilie out of her mind. If Ottilie was cooking, the terrible old woman was sure to come poking around the stove, and when she did not like what there was to eat she would take a mouthful and spit it on the floor. Every mess she could think of she made: she insisted on having the goat in the room, whatever she touched was soon spilled or broken, and to Royal she complained that a woman who couldn't keep a nice house for her husband was worthless. She was about the whole day, and her red, remorseless eyes were seldom shut; but the worst of it, the thing that finally made Ottilie threaten to kill her, was the old woman's habit of sneaking up from nowhere and pinching her so hard you could see the fingernail marks.

" If you do that one more time—if you just dare—I'll snatch that knife and cut out your heart ! " she said.

Old Bonaparte knew Ottilie meant it, and though she stopped the pinching, she thought of other jokes : for instance, she made a point of walking all over a certain part of the yard, pretending she did not know Ottilie had planted a little garden there.

One day two exceptional things happened. A boy came from the village bringing a letter for Ottilie ; at the Champs Elysées postcards had once in a while arrived from sailors and other travelling men who had spent pleasant moments with her, but this was the first letter she had ever received. Since she could not read it, her first impulse was to tear it up : there was no use having it hang around to haunt her. Of course, there was a chance that some day she would learn to read ; and so she went to hide it in her sewing basket.

When she opened the sewing basket, she made a sinister discovery : there, like a gruesome ball of yarn, was the severed head of a yellow cat. So the old woman was up to new tricks !

" She wants to put a spell," thought Ottilie, not in the least frightened.

Primly lifting the head by one of its ears, she carried it to the stove and dropped it into a boiling pot : at noon, Old Bonaparte sucked her teeth and remarked that the soup Ottilie had made for her was surprisingly tasty.

The next morning, just in time for the midday meal, she found twisting in her basket a small green snake which, chopping fine as sand, she sprinkled into a serving of stew. Each day her ingenuity was tested : there were spiders to bake, a lizard to fry, a buzzard's breast to boil. Old Bonaparte ate several helpings of everything. With a restless glittering her eyes followed Ottilie as she watched for some sign that the spell was taking hold.

" You don't look well, Ottilie," she said, mixing a little molasses in the vinegar of her voice. " You eat like an ant : here, now, why don't you have a bowl of this good soup ? "

" Because," answered Ottilie evenly, " I don't like buzzard in my soup ; or spiders in my bread, or snakes in the stew : I have no appetite for such things."

Old Bonaparte understood ; with swelling veins, and a stricken, powerless tongue, she rose shakily to her feet, then crashed across the table. Before nightfall she was dead.

Royal summoned mourners. They came from the village, from the neighbouring hills and, wailing like dogs at midnight, laid siege to the house. Old women beat their heads against the walls, moaning men prostrated themselves : it was the art of sorrow, and

those who best mimicked grief were much admired. After the funeral everyone went away, satisfied that they had done a good job.

Now the house belonged to Ottilie. Without Old Bonaparte's prying, and her mess to clean, she had more spare time, but she did not know what to do with it. She sprawled on the great brass bed, she loafed in front of the mirror; monotony hummed in her head, and to drive away its fly-buzz sound she would sing the songs she had learned from the jukebox at the Champs Elysées. Waiting in the twilight for Royal she would remember that at this hour her friends in Port-au-Prince were gossiping on the porch and waiting for the turning headlights of a car; but when she saw Royal ambling up the path, his cane cutter swinging at his side like a crescent moon, she forgot such thoughts and ran with a satisfied heart to meet him.

One night as they lay half drowsing, Ottilie felt suddenly another presence in the room. Then, gleaming there at the foot of the bed, she saw, as she had seen before, a watching eye. Thus she knew what for some time she had suspected: that Old Bonaparte was dead, but not gone. Once, when she was alone in the house, she had heard a laugh, and once again, out in the yard, she had seen the goat gazing at someone who was not there and twinkling his ears as he did whenever the old woman scratched his skull.

"Stop shaking the bed," said Royal; and Ottilie, with a finger raised at the eye, whisperingly asked him if he could not see it. When he replied that she was dreaming, she reached for the eye and screamed at feeling only air.

Royal lighted a lamp; he cuddled Ottilie on his lap and smoothed her hair while she told him of the discoveries she had made in her sewing basket, and of how she had disposed of them: was it wrong what she'd done? Royal did not know; it was not for him to say, but it was his opinion that she would have to be punished: and why, because the old woman wanted it, because she would otherwise never leave Ottilie in peace: that was the way with haunts.

Accordingly, Royal fetched a rope the next morning and proposed to tie Ottilie to a tree in the yard: there she was to remain until dark without food or water, and anyone passing would know her to be in a state of disgrace.

But Ottilie crawled under the bed and refused to come out.

"I'll run away," she whimpered. "Royal, if you try to tie me to that old tree, I'll run away."

"Then I'd have to go and get you," said Royal, "and that would be the worse for you."

He gripped her by an ankle and dragged her squealing from under the bed. All the way to the yard she caught at things—the door, a vine, the goat's beard—but none of these would hold her

and Royal was not detained from tying her to the tree. He made three knots in the rope, and went off to work sucking his hand where she had bit him. She called after him all the bad words she had ever heard, until he disappeared over the hill. The goat, Juno and the chickens, gathered to stare at her humiliation; slumping to the ground, Ottilie stuck out her tongue at them.

Because she was almost asleep, Ottilie thought it was a dream when, in the company of a child from the village, Baby and Rosita, wobbling on high heels and carrying fancy umbrellas, tottered up the path calling her name. Since they were people in a dream, they probably would not be surprised to find her tied to a tree.

"My God, are you mad?" shrieked Baby, keeping her distance. "Speak to us, Ottilie!"

Blinking, giggling, Ottilie said, "I'm just happy to see you. Rosita, please untie me so that I can hug you both."

"So this is what the brute does," said Rosita, tearing at the ropes. "Wait till I see him, beating you and tying you in the yard like a dog."

"Oh, no," said Ottilie. "Royal never beats me. It's just that today I'm being punished."

"You wouldn't listen to us," said Baby. "And now you see what's come of it. That man has plenty to answer for," she added, brandishing her umbrella.

Ottilie hugged her friends and kissed them.

"Isn't it a pretty house?" she said, leading them towards it. "It's as if you picked a wagon of flowers and built a house with them: that is what I think. Come in out of the sun. It's cool inside and smells so sweet."

Rosita sniffed as though what she smelled was nothing sweet, and in her well-bottom voice declared that yes, it was better that they stay out of the sun, as it was affecting Ottilie's head.

"It's a mercy that we've come," said Baby, fishing inside an enormous purse. "And you can thank Mr. Jamison for that. *Madame* said you were dead, and when you didn't answer our letter we thought it must be so. But Mr. Jamison, that's the loveliest man you'll ever know, he hired a car for me and Rosita, your dearest loving friends, to come up here and find out what had happened to our Ottilie. Ottilie, I've got a bottle of rum here in my bag, so get us a glass and we'll all have a round."

The elegant foreign manners and flashing finery of the city ladies had intoxicated their guide, a little boy whose peeking black eyes bobbed at the window. Ottilie was impressed, too, for it was a long time since she had seen painted lips or smelled bottle perfume, and while Baby poured the rum, she got out her satin

shoes, her pearl ear-rings.

" Dear," said Rosita when Ottilie had finished dressing up, " there's no man alive that wouldn't buy you a whole keg of beer : to think of it, a gorgeous piece like you suffering far away from those who love you."

" I haven't been suffering so much," said Ottilie. " Just sometimes."

" Hush now," said Baby. " You don't have to talk about it yet. It's all over, anyway. Here, dear, let me see your glass again. A toast to old times, and those to be ! Tonight Mr. Jamison is going to buy champagne for everybody : *Madame* is letting him have it at half price."

" Oh," said Ottilie, envying her friends. Well, she wanted to know, what did people say of her ; was she remembered ?

" Ottilie, you have no idea," said Baby. " Men nobody ever laid eyes on before have come into the place asking where is Ottilie, because they've heard about you way off in Havana and Miami. As for Mr. Jamison, he doesn't even look at us other girls, just comes and sits on the porch drinking by himself."

" Yes," said Ottilie wistfully, " he was always sweet to me, Mr. Jamison."

Presently the sun was slanting, and the bottle of rum stood three quarters empty. A thunderburst of rain had for a moment drenched the hills that now, seen through the windows, shimmered like dragonfly wings, and a breeze, rich with the scent of rained-on flowers, roamed the room, rustling the green and pink papers on the walls. Many stories had been told, some of them funny, a few that were sad ; it was like any night's talk at the Champs Elysées, and Ottilie was happy to be a part of it again.

" But it's getting late," said Baby, " and we promised to be back before midnight. Ottilie, can we help you pack ? "

Although she had not realized that her friends expected her to leave with them, the rum stirring in her made it seem a likely assumption, and with a smile she thought, " I told him I would go away." " Only," she said aloud, " it's not as if I would have even a week to enjoy myself : Royal will come down and get me."

Both her friends laughed at this.

" You're so silly," said Baby. " I'd like to see that Royal when some of our men got through with him."

" I wouldn't stand for anybody hurting Royal," said Ottilie. " Besides, he'd be even madder when we got home."

Baby said, " But, Ottilie, you wouldn't be coming back here."

Ottilie giggled, and looked about the room as though she saw something invisible to the others.

" Why, sure I would," she said.

Rolling her eyes, Baby produced a fan and jerked it in front of her face.

" That's the craziest thing I've ever heard," she said. " Isn't that the craziest thing you've ever heard, Rosita ? "

" It's that Ottilie's been through so much," said Rosita. " Dear, why don't you lie down on the bed while we pack your things ? "

Ottilie watched as they commenced piling her possessions. They scooped up her combs and pins, they wound up her silk stockings. She took off her pretty clothes, as if she were going to put on something finer still ; instead, she slipped back into her old dress ; then, working quietly, and as though she were helping her friends, she put everything back where it belonged. Baby stamped her foot when she saw what was happening.

" Listen," said Ottilie, " if you and Rosita are my friends, please do what I tell you : tie me in the yard just like I was when you came. That way, no bee is ever going to sting me."

" Stinking drunk," said Baby ; but Rosita told her to shut up.

" I think," said Rosita with a sigh, " I think Ottilie is in love."

If Royal wanted her back, she would go with him, and this being the way things were, they might as well go home and say that *Madame* was right, that Ottilie was dead.

" Yes," said Ottilie, for the drama of it appealed to her, " tell them that I am dead."

So they went into the yard ; there, with heaving bosom and eyes as round as the daytime moon scudding above, Baby said she would have no part in tying Ottilie to the tree, which left Rosita to do it alone. On parting, it was Ottilie who cried the most, though she was glad to see them go, for she knew that as soon as they were gone she would not think of them again. Teetering on their high heels down the dips of the path, they turned to wave, but Ottilie could not wave back, and so she forgot them before they were out of sight.

Chewing eucalyptus leaves to sweeten her breath, she felt the chill of twilight twitch the air. Yellow deepened the daytime moon, and roosting birds sailed into the darkness of the tree. Suddenly, hearing Royal on the path, she threw her legs akimbo, let her neck go limp, lolled her eyes far back into their sockets. Seen from a distance, it would look as though she had come to some violent, pitiful end ; and, listening to Royal's footsteps quicken to a run, she thought happily, " This will give him a good scare ! "

* * *

DON'T LOOK NOW !

A true artist takes no notice whatever of the public.

OSCAR WILDE

HOSTAGE

Sometimes he had an uneasy feeling that the time for his release had come and gone

by

WILLIAM ASHLEY ANDERSON

IN that instant a casual photographer caught a snapshot of Rolf Orlop which subsequently appeared in many publications. It was merely an amateurish picture of an English gentleman about to enter what appeared to be a rather shabby taxicab. Obviously he was a big hearty man dressed comfortably in West Country tweeds with a Tattersall waistcoat, *veldschoens* on oversize feet, and pipe in hand. It seemed as if he might be returning from a bad day at the races.

As a matter of fact he had been spending a dull afternoon watching the short-legged Sanpeitzu horses on the old gymkhana field outside Peiping.

As a youth he had followed the conventions of country life and was satisfied that he was an authority on horses. Tales of the fabulous endurance of the Mongolian breeds had aroused his interest; but this interest was succeeded by contempt when he found that not one of those on display was more than thirteen hands high.

In exasperation he wandered off to find a lift back to the Wagons-Lits. It was then he experienced the greatest shock of his selfishly ordered life; for, unseen by the cameraman, the Chinese who directed him held a pistol pointed at the pit of his stomach. The outraged Orlop assumed he was in the hands of bandits. As blood rushed to his head with the suddenness of it, he lost all sense of reality. The movement of people and horses, of carts and automobiles, which animated the flat fields in all directions, seemed remote, vague and shadowy; and sounds came to him muffled by the buzzing in his ears.

The only thing sharply in focus was the gun aimed at his stomach.

Orlop was first astounded, then furiously indignant. He had enough self-possession, however, to realize that he could not argue with the gun, and it would be madness to strike at the dirty wax-like hand that held it. He got into the car.

Although he knew it was the custom of the infamous brigands to

lop off fingers and ears of their prisoners when ransom was delayed, he had no concern over the outcome. No matter what was demanded, he knew it would be paid promptly. Rather, he was resentful at the interruption in his plan to fly back to Shanghai that evening and at being obliged to take orders from a miserable, dirty, undersized thug.

Orlop could see the blue-grey mass of Peiping's eastern wall on his left as the car moved out of traffic on to a country road that skirted the city ; but he could see little else since the peppery yellow dust seeped and swirled like smoke into the car, filling his eyes and nose to the point of suffocation. Sweat poured down his face and neck, making muddy rivulets ; and in order to breathe he had to tear off his cravat and open his garments.

Before nightfall the city walls had been left far behind, purple mountains rose about them, and he supposed they were headed for Jehol, the ancient capital of the Manchus. For a while they travelled over a fair highway.

As darkness closed in, this gave place to deep-rutted roads that wound precariously through mountains. With knees apart and forearms on his thighs, Orlop slumped forward like a drunken man, swaying with the lurch of the car. A sort of numbness crept over him.

He tried to think clearly, but he was no longer in a position to plan and there was nothing upon which to concentrate.

He was a selfish man who had always had the means of gratifying his desires ; and at first he saw only hot flashes of the confusion and panic that would result from his absence ; but then the complexity of these impressions gave way to more intimate things. Ordinarily he did not waste much thought on his wife and children, but now he saw them standing before him as if afraid of him, yet devoted to him. All at once he felt an astonishing yearning for them.

When morning dawned, a halt was made at a mountain inn where Orlop was allowed to get down and stretch his cramped body.

When he was directed into a musty room, black with generations of smoke from bean-oil lamps, and suddenly found himself among a group of Europeans, or, at least, men who were foreign to China, he felt embarrassed.

All began to talk at once, but none spoke in English. At first their languages were as much gibberish to Orlop as Chinese and Mongol. There was Portuguese, he supposed, and there was French, which he finally recognized. It appeared that all were prisoners like himself. He shook hands perfunctorily, noting distastefully how dirty they all were.

He swallowed several cups of watery tea, though it almost turned

his stomach to see a pock-marked attendant put the spout of the pot to his wet mouth to blow away a clog of leaves.

The slimy mess of food he rejected completely, staying his hunger with some grey lumps of millet bread.

It was settled in Orlop's mind that he and the others had been picked up for ransom, though his companions did not look to him like lucrative prizes. At the thought he straightened his cravat and rubbed his face and neck with his big handkerchief. All at once he realized that he had not been searched and his wallet was safe. His assurance was instantly restored.

" You ! " he called, beckoning to an attendant and offering him a pound note. Before Orlop could add a word the Chinese struck his wrist, and the note floated to the dirt floor.

" You fool," cried Orlop, choking with rage, but not daring to strike back. " That's an English pound sterling ! "

The man wore a greasy padded jacket open at the neck ; his forehead was grey with dust ; and he did not look unlike the beggars who sit against the walls picking vermin from the seams of their ragged garments. To be rebuffed by this wretch—to have his money thrown back in his face—it was monstrous !

Orlop turned wild, questioning eyes on his companions. Slowly it dawned on him with a sort of horror that money had no value in the present situation. His brain was in such ferment he could make little of the explanations, though ordinarily he could have got along well enough in French. " *Prisonnier*, yes, I understand ! But why ? Why ? "

This time the entire lot was crowded into the sedan. There were six or seven wedged stiflingly and obscenely together, unable to exchange a coherent word. Soon, despite their common misery, they began to loathe one another. The thought of overpowering the drivers and taking possession of the car may have occurred to them ; but now there was another car following, loaded with men armed with rifles and Tommy guns. Fortunately, as they were emerging from the mountains on to the fringes of the vast Mongolian plateau, their misery brought its own relief ; the overcrowded car collapsed.

At this point, with the plains sweeping away in an endless undulating grey-green sea of grass and gravel, it was impossible to secure further mechanical transport. The guard car was therefore dispatched for aid, and before nightfall two lumbering Peking carts appeared, each drawn by three ponies, one in the shafts and the others on traces. Though the carts were springless, the going now was over the open plain. The night was cool and the stars came out in dazzling purity. Orlop and his companions lay on a pile of quilts. The silence of the desert descended peacefully upon them.

Late that night they camped in the open around small argol fires. Mutton was toasted on the ends of iron rods.

Among the men around the camp-fires Orlop recognized Mongols, quite distinct from even the sturdy Northern Chinese they had encountered in the mountains. They resembled American Plains Indians—powerful, brawny men, bowlegged, with big heads and strong jaws. Their colour was ruddy and their eyes were deep oblique slits. Orlop, who was beginning to feel a rising of the spirit in the winy air, as if he were leaving an attack of fever behind, observed that they were good-natured, playful, and inclined to be friendly.

Now Orlop was no scholar, but he had been well founded in his studies; and as a man of the world he had an objective knowledge of historic trends. These Mongols, he knew, were of the race that had produced Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, who, starting with the horsemen of these fenceless steppes, had conquered the world from the Dnieper River in Europe to the Ganges in India, from the Mediterranean to the South China Sea.

He knew of their recent history too, because Mongolia was the vast buffer between China and Soviet Russia, vital to each, yet hard for either to absorb. Russia had indeed absorbed, or, at least, had sovietized Outer Mongolia, which borders Siberia to the north and Manchuria to the east; but Inner Mongolia still remained under the rule of China.

Under Russian influence in Outer Mongolia, the ancient patriarchal government of princes, dukes and khans, who slept in felt tents with their nomad subjects and lived in the saddle with them in the democracy of a free life, had vanished. The nobles had disappeared much as the Russian nobles disappeared when the Bolsheviks purged White Russia.

Looking at his strange camp mates, Orlop wondered if the same things might now be happening to Inner Mongolia under the rule of Chinese communists. Like Tibet, it was one of the last islands of resistance to communism, but undoubtedly it too would be tricked and trapped and destroyed. He winced at the thought and glanced suspiciously at his companions.

Conversation had died out among them and they lay dejected and exhausted on the ground, wrapped in their thoughts. Who were they? Some were French or Portuguese, he supposed, or perhaps Greek or some other kind of Levantine—the sort who still did a sizable foreign trade through compradors in the interior.

At this point Orlop thrust his hand into his pocket and made the most disturbing discovery since leaving Peiping. He had no more pipe tobacco.

As he stood looking mournfully into the empty bowl, one of the

Mongols approached and extended a fistful of native tobacco. It was coarse, dry and dusty, but it would fill his pipe. Orlop thumbed it down gravely and lighted it with a *bougie*. He sucked slowly and his heavy countenance lighted.

" Not bad at all," he exclaimed. Without thinking, he extended the pipe. The Mongol took it with surprise, drew heavily, and went into a paroxysm of coughing. " Too big a pipe for you," said Orlop in alarm, slapping him on the back.

The other Mongols rolled on the ground, roaring with laughter. Orlop exploded in a great laugh of relief. Soon he was seated among them, comparing his pipe with their long-stemmed thimble-rigged instruments which they puffed lightly with pouted lips.

He did not mind the dust of their yellow sheepskins and ragged fox skin caps. Dust became them and they seemed exactly what they were, natural and understandable barbarians. He was sure he would have no difficulty in coming to terms with them. On the other hand, he did not understand the Chinese who shouted angrily and finally ordered him back to the morose company of the foreigners.

At sunrise they were on their way again.

About noon they came unexpectedly upon a depression that held a village of scattered mud-brick buildings like rabbit hutches thrown about a bare field, enclosed by a low mud rampart. In general appearance it was a Chinese outpost whose centre was a grey-brick building with curved tiled roof that was undoubtedly a *yamen*, the headquarters of an official of some sort. To Orlop's amazement there was a pole extending above the roof of the *yamen* with an aerial dangling from it.

Outside the palisade on low sloping hillsides, beyond which was the ragged fringe of ochre-tinted mountains, was an encampment of Mongols. Their tentlike *yurtas* of felt stood in irregular clusters around which horses were tethered and wolflike dogs prowled. Though there appeared to be no hostility, it was evident the settlements represented two different cultures.

The escorting car careered in a swirl of dust through the wide gateway, followed by the lumbering carts. A careless guard of border Mongols and Chinese watched them go by. The villagers too turned and watched as the cavalcade drew up before the *yamen*.

Here the foreigners were herded into a square room furnished with a long table, behind which sat three men in long-sleeved quilted jackets. They had shocks of straight black hair roughly parted at the side, which typified them instantly as modern Chinese. Behind them on the wall was an enormous photograph of Mao Tse. The pattern was so familiar that Orlop recognized instantly that this was some sort of people's court.

Without preliminaries the chief commissar, a rotund man with reddish bulging eyes, spoke in the hoarse Chinese of Manchuria. One of the prisoners responded with a protesting flow of Mandarin ; but he was cut short by an angry shout, and subsided as if struck in the belly. The Chinese on the left, a cold pale youth, then spoke in mincing French. Three of the foreigners showed they understood ; but it was beyond Orlop's understanding.

Finally the third said in flat English, " Listen. You have nothing to say about this. Walk where you please in the village. Not outside. We give you food and things. You are at liberty. But be very careful. We will be very severe. You may write one letter—"

" That's all very well," interrupted Orlop, restraining himself, " but, after all, I don't know what this is about. If it is ransom you want, just what are your demands ? "

" We are no bandits ! " snapped the commissar.

" Do you realize," said Orlop, completely baffled but with rising assurance as it slowly became a conviction that he was indeed dealing with an official, " that I carry a British passport properly chopped by the Chinese People's Government in Peiping ? "

The look the three commissars gave Orlop startled him. He felt that he had come up hard against a wall.

" In this case," the chief commissar said in perfectly good English, his eyes smouldering, " the Chinese People's Government will not interpose. We are dealing in our own way with aggression—with aggressors."

" Me ? " gasped Orlop, stupefied.

" All of you. Never have we had satisfaction for the territory stolen—Hong Kong, Macao, Formosa, Korea."

" Korea ! Oh, now ! "

" Specifically, your governments have seized certain patriots. You have made the supreme insult of calling them war criminals. There is pressure to have them condemned. We will never permit that. Never ! If they are not properly released you will pay."

There was a moment of silence as they studied each other across the table.

" I cannot believe," said Orlop, " that you are serious. Hostages ! Who the devil do you think I am ? "

The chief commissar put on a pair of spectacles and consulted a sheet of paper. He proceeded to read a dossier on Orlop that not only revealed all his actual holdings and controls in a whole series of commercial and industrial enterprises but also the many boards on which he sat as a director, and his domestic and financial relationships. The situation was not reassuring. At the same time it struck him as so ridiculous he could not restrain a laugh.

" Shut up, you capitalistic pig ! " shouted the commissar.

"Whatever you may think, you are a prisoner. We will not hesitate to liquidate you. This place does not exist officially. We ourselves will not be here to talk English to you. Talk Mongol or Chinese—while you can! Better for you if those patriots are released!"

They were turned loose on the steps of the *yamen*.

The rising tension in Orlop snapped as he realized there was nothing he could do about the matter. All he could do was wander aimlessly about the bleak colourless village. With no one to take orders from him, he was simply a man alone. All that he had been was stripped from him. As he stood looking about, it occurred to him, not unpleasantly, that he was in fact a barbarian.

Their accommodation was limited to small huts in which were raised platforms, called *k'angs*, upon which they slept at night. Bowls of gruel and boiled mutton and pots of tea or fermented milk were brought at intervals. Orlop received tobacco.

After Orlop wrote his first dull but affectionate and reassuring letter to his family, he accepted the fact that he was completely cut off from all contact with his world.

His beard grew into an impressive adornment. He found no great interest in the other prisoners, but contented himself wandering about, watching the curious customs of the Chinese and Mongols. He saw them stitch patches of rawhide to the worn pads of camels. He saw a man drive an eight-inch needle up a horse's nostril to cure it of lameness. He saw a cart drive away with a corpse, followed by a pack of savage dogs that would devour it when jolted loose somewhere on the plains. This last bit of brutal callousness shocked him.

He was even more shocked at the treatment he saw administered to a living criminal. Like himself, this prisoner was free to move about; like himself, he was nevertheless incapable of exercising freedom. He sat in the dust, his back to a crumbling wall adjoining his *yamen*. Flies buzzed around his bare shaven head and clustered in clumps upon his eyes. Except for this and the splashing of dull red sunburn on his high cheek bones, his round young face appeared expressionless.

A few raffish dogs, fat on the flesh of human corpses, sniffed tentatively at his felt boots. He neither moved nor gave any indication of his suffering. Though free to stand up and move legs and arms, to change position as he wished, he was squatting immobile in the dust when Orlop saw him. Orlop's first impression was one of passing curiosity; for, though he had seen pictures of the cangue in old Oriental prints, he had never thought it might still be in use.

The wooden cangue was like a portable stock clamped upon the

prisoner's neck. Broad as the top of a small table, thick as a narrow beam, it held him even more helpless than the hobbles on horses that grazed within pistol shot, because his arms, though free, could not extend around the cangue far enough for hands to touch his head. Without the compassionate hands of others, he would inevitably die of hunger and thirst, in the meantime suffering the torment of flies and sun and the dust that always blew.

Orlop had stared at him with the detached curiosity with which one observes a strange animal in a cage, but as he looked the young man lifted his head with a long strangled sigh and his deep black eyes opened to meet the blue of the Englishman's. Orlop's sense of shock was almost physical. The bitterness of such loneliness so far transcended his own that it sickened him. In that instant his relationship to the prisoner became an intimate one. He began to suffer with him.

So far as the other inhabitants of the stockade were concerned, Orlop's phlegmatic indifference, once he accepted his situation, combined with his imposing appearance now dignified by a flourishing beard, brought him a degree of consideration that almost amounted to friendliness. He unbent with the children, never attempting to learn their language, speaking to them in English as if they were his own while he fashioned simple toys for them—slings, flutes from bits of kaoliang stalk, and twisted pieces of paper that shot into the air like jet planes. He had little in common with his foreign companions, who could not let well enough alone, but became alternately depressed and terrified by rumours that apparently had their origin in the *yamen's* wireless set.

Once, apparently after an attempt to escape, two of the foreigners were marched off to one side of the enclosure and shot. Orlop did not see the execution, since he had no warning of it. He heard a ragged volley and later saw the bodies crumpled like heaps of rags that held no identity for him. He was more irritated than shocked, for he assumed they had done something they had been warned not to do. Besides, there was an unreal quality to the whole affair that made it difficult for him even to recognize himself. It made him accept subsequent shootings as if in a dream, calmly, fatalistically, as if sooner or later he would wake up in a sweat and find it all nonsense.

Sometimes Orlop did feel an uneasy impression that the time for his release was long overdue ; but he was still too conscious of his dignity to show fear through anxious inquiry. The thought of release came to him as he was standing alone, staring at the Mongol prisoner with the cangue about his neck. All at once he was unable to stand the sight of him longer.

Orlop hunted up a bowl of water and a rag ; then with unruffled

deliberation he approached the prisoner and cleaned his eyes of flies, wiped his face, and held a bottle so that he could drink deeply. The deep-slitted eyes opened and looked at him.

All within sight stood as if hypnotized.

" Too bad," said Orlop angrily, " if someone cannot give the poor devil a drink."

Having made the gesture, he now felt that he was involved. He became excited. Damned if he was going to stop at a sip of water! He found an iron rasp which the farriers used to file horses' hoofs; and that night, slipping out in the darkness, he inserted the rasp beneath the staples of the lock and released the cangue. The Mongol was free.

Orlop slept soundly.

The following day as Orlop was walking about, enjoying his smoke, he was intercepted and brought before the headman. Movement everywhere was suddenly suspended as he walked towards the small group who watched his approach. They were a strange lot of barbarians, Orlop thought, even as the realization dawned chillingly upon him that now his turn had come.

Apparently all the village knew he was to die; but to him, thus far, the whole stupid business had been something like the recollection of a circus seen in childhood—vague but exciting memories without significance.

As he confronted the headman—a big renegade border Mongol with frowning slits set in a bright coppery face framed in flaming fox skin headdress—he had nothing to support him but his stubbornness.

" Look here," he said, pointing with his pipe stem, " this thing has gone far enough. Let me get in touch with your own government officials at Peiping. Do you understand?"

The headman did not understand. No one seemed to understand. The headman looked at the unshaken figure of the Englishman with admiration. He turned away for further discussion with his council. All at once Orlop knew it was no good. He was about to die. Sweat burst out on his forehead and he felt a tremor run through him.

He gave a wild look about and saw the dull implacable faces staring at him, arrested from their ordinary interests only long enough to see him killed. The warm brilliant sunshine made everything calmly undramatic. Orlop noticed a hairy dog unconcernedly nosing a lump of filth; in a very short time it might be gnawing his dead face. He saw the firing squad—bowlegged men in greasy skirts and sheepskins—assembling on foot. They were examining their carbines, laughing and talking among themselves.

No attempt had been made to bind Orlop. They knew he had nowhere to run to. They knew he knew it too. He would simply start walking and stand there with his pipe in his teeth, staring with bulging eyes until they blew holes in his head and body.

As Orlop thought of this, now walking towards the headman, there was a movement among the watching Mongols, and attention was drawn for an instant away from him. At this moment a Mongol, coming close to Orlop, drew a weapon from under his sheepskin and handed it to him. This was the crowning irony ; for the weapon was—of all things !—a boy's air gun !

My God, thought Orlop dully, *what is this for ?* But as he looked at the thing, suddenly his resentment surged into rage and panic. He could not die like a sheep or a pig. He had to do something. He had to make a run for it.

He found himself side-stepping to take advantage of a dirt-walled enclosure for manure ; he crouched ; and in an instant he was dashing heavily for the gateway. There was no formal guard at the gateway, but several armed men were lounging about on foot. One attempted to block Orlop's path. Without pausing, Orlop thrust the ridiculous toy at the big red face and in that act pulled the trigger. Amazingly, the little gun popped off. Stung by the soundless shot, the frightened Mongol dropped his rifle with a loud cry, clapping both hands to his face. The others, startled by the effect of the mysterious weapon, flung themselves aside.

Orlop was free. As he ran through the scattered *yurtas* that stretched across the plain, twisting and turning in a frenzy, outstretched arms pointed. " Go that way ! Go that way ! "

He did not understand the commands, but he saw the gestures, and he saw three horses with two mounted Mongols and an empty saddle. He seized the high pommel and pulled himself into the saddle. Even as his foot pressed the stirrup the horses were off.

Two things were immediately in Orlop's favour. There were no cars to pursue him ; and the guards within the wall were so taken by surprise that considerable time was lost as they sought their hobbled horses. A few bullets whined about him, but before pursuit could be organized the horses dipped beyond the rise.

Other mounted Mongols now converged upon them. These, too, proved to be friends, and soon they were a formidable group that could not be incautiously attacked. They galloped on at a pace that not even a Mongol horse could endure for long. Just as it seemed they would founder, they came upon a grazing herd. In a matter of seconds they transferred to fresh mounts and were off again in full flight even as the herd behind them scattered. Fresh Mongols took up the role of escort. Thus began Orlop's amazing

flight straight across Mongolia towards the heart of Asia and over the Pamirs to safety in Iran.

The plains were clear of obstacles, and since the motion of a galloping horse is comfortable, even restful, especially in a cushioned Mongol saddle, it was no hardship for Orlop to continue the relays that were provided throughout the day and far into the starry night.

Orlop knew that as soon as the wireless reported his escape a pursuit would be organized by the military forces bordering the entire area. Aeroplanes, armoured cars and motorized flying patrols were probably already in service. However, Mongolia is vast, with the more desolate stretches of the Gobi Desert in its heart; and as soon as Orlop and his rescuers were loose upon the plain, they were as difficult to locate as individual fish in the open sea. Besides, the flight was not haphazard.

Before many days had passed, Orlop realized he had been taken in hand and befriended by a still powerful and resourceful faction of the free Mongols who were resisting the inroads of communism. Whether or not this aid had been organized and directed by British agents he could not learn with the limited phrases of Mongol at his command.

He did learn that he was using a unique resource that has survived in Mongolia from the days of Genghis Khan, who reputedly established it. This is a system of free relays that exists among the hundreds of thousands of branded horses that graze with the wandering encampments all the way from Manchuria to the Altai Mountains, which form the boundary with Russia on the west.

In this manner Orlop was able to traverse enormous distances at speeds that would have seemed incredible until the coming of machines. Each day, however, brought him closer to hostile and extremely difficult territory.

One day the relays, which had been growing more and more difficult, came to an end in the vicinity of Kobdo, under the slopes of the Altais and uncomfortably near the Russians. They found sanctuary in an isolated monastery of Buddhist lamas who appeared to be expecting them. For the first time in a month Orlop slept upon the soft felt quilts of a *k'ang*. Before dawn he was awakened to one more astounding thing.

An aeroplane, driven by a Russian-trained Mongol, was warming up under the stars. Within an hour they had taken off. Though he had been passed from hand to hand so that he did not make the acquaintance of one man for long, Orlop had made friends. He had thrown off the aloofness of his way of life; and he liked the Mongols. They liked him. He was deeply grateful to them and he

was troubled with the thought of how he might repay them.

His own concerns had been so intimately personal that the sudden shock of his first encounter with an Englishman—a sharp but taciturn consular official who met them when the plane descended at a frontier post in Iran—left him tongue-tied and embarrassed. Months had passed since he had conversed with anyone. He was gaunt and his eyes red-rimmed; and with his full rusty beard he knew he resembled a Pathan more than he did an Englishman. Besides, he was sure that the smell of a nomad horseman hung about him.

His first need, therefore, was expressed in a plaintive request for pipe tobacco. He filled his pipe and smoked with great contentment, his eyes half-closed. Next he wanted a drink of Scotch. This was promptly forthcoming. Orlop looked into his glass unbelievingly and lifted it with a grin.

"You fellows did a splendid job," he said. "But I don't want you to forget what those Mongols did. Incredible. I can't for the life of me imagine how you got them to go to all that trouble."

"Why," exclaimed the consul, astounded, "we had nothing to do with it really. It was all Temujin's doing."

"Temujin? Temujin? Who on earth is Temujin?"

"The one you cut loose from the cangue!"

"Oh, him," said Orlop, wiping his beard. "That poor devil. What in the world could he do?"

"Good heavens, man, don't you really know? Temujin! The prince. According to the Mongols, he is the only really worthy descendant of Genghis Khan. They expect him to do great things!"

"Do they indeed?" said Orlop, who was no longer easy to astonish.

He looked thoughtfully into his empty glass, and a warm feeling of gratification began to fill him. As he considered the origins of men like Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and Mao Tse-tung, he thought it quite possible that in this young man there was a new leader who might rise up and at last put a firm stop to Asiatic communism. Temujin! Temujin! All at once Orlop shuddered. Good God, had he loosed another Genghis Khan upon the world?

"How is my wife?" he asked mildly.

"Splendid. Everything is fine. You will have a most happy homecoming, sir."

* * *

AU NATUREL

What is embarrassing about reality is its inappropriateness.

ELIZABETH BIBESCO, *Haven*

NINE-FINGER JACK

Any man of his profession is sure to end up with a Venusian — and trouble

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

JOHN SMITH is an unexciting name to possess, and there was of course no way for him to know, until the end of his career, that he would be forever famous among connoisseurs of murder as Nine-finger Jack. But he did not mind the drabness of Smith; he felt that what was good enough for the great George Joseph was good enough for him.

Not only did John Smith happily share his surname with George Joseph; he was proud to follow the celebrated G.J. in profession and even in method. For an attractive and plausible man of a certain age, there are few more satisfactory sources of income than frequent and systematic widowerhood; and of all the practitioners who have acted upon this practical principle, none have improved upon George Joseph Smith's sensible and unpatented Brides-in-the-Bath method.

John Smith's marriage to his ninth bride, Hester Pringle, took place on the morning of May the thirty-first. On the evening of May the thirty-first John Smith, having spent much of the afternoon pointing out to friends how much the wedding had excited Hester and how much he feared the effect on her notoriously weak heart, entered the bathroom and, with the careless ease of the practiced professional, employed five of his fingers to seize Hester's ankles and jerk her legs out of the tub while with the other five fingers he gently pressed her face just below water level.

So far all had proceeded in the conventional manner of any other wedding night; but the ensuing departure from ritual was such as to upset even John Smith's professional bathside manner. The moment Hester's face and neck were submerged below water, she opened her gills.

In his amazement, John released his grasp upon both ends of his bride. Her legs descended into the water and her face rose above it. As she passed from the element of water to that of air, her gills closed and her mouth opened.

"I suppose," she observed, "that in the intimacy of a long marriage you would eventually have discovered in any case that I

am a Venusian. It is perhaps as well that the knowledge came early, so that we may lay a solid basis for understanding."

"Do you mean," John asked, for he was a precise man, "that you are a native of the planet Venus?"

"I do," she said. "You would be astonished to know how many of us there are already among you."

"I am sufficiently astonished," said John, "to learn of one. Would you mind convincing me that I did indeed see what I thought I saw?"

Obligingly, Hester lowered her head beneath the water. Her gills opened and her breath bubbled merrily. "The nature of our planet," she explained when she emerged, "has bred as its dominant race our species of amphibian mammals, in all other respects superficially identical with *homo sapiens*. You will find it all but impossible to recognize any of us, save perhaps by noticing those who, to avoid accidental opening of the gills, refuse to swim. Such concealment will of course be unnecessary soon when we take over complete control of your planet."

"And what do you propose to do with the race that already controls it?"

"Kill most of them, I suppose," said Hester; "and might I trouble you for that towel?"

"That," pronounced John, with any hand-craftsman's abhorrence of mass production, "is monstrous. I see my duty to my race: I must reveal all."

"I am afraid," Hester observed as she dried herself, "that you will not. In the first place, no one will believe you. In the second place, I shall then be forced to present to the authorities the complete dossier which I have gathered on the cumulatively interesting deaths of your first eight wives, together with my direct evidence as to your attempt this evening."

John Smith, being a reasonable man, pressed the point no further. "In view of this attempt," he said, "I imagine you would like either a divorce or an annulment."

"Indeed I should not," said Hester. "There is no better cover for my activities than marriage to a member of the native race. In fact, should you so much as mention divorce again, I shall be forced to return to the topic of that dossier. And now, if you will hand me that robe, I intend to do a little telephoning. Some of my better-placed colleagues will need to know my new name and address."

As John Smith heard her ask the long-distance operator for Washington, D.C., he realized with regretful resignation that he would be forced to depart from the methods of the immortal George Joseph.

Through the failure of the knife, John Smith learned that Venusian blood has extraordinary quick-clotting powers and Venusian organs possess an amazingly rapid system of self-regeneration. And the bullet taught him a further peculiarity of the blood : that it dissolves lead—in fact thrives upon lead.

His skill as a cook was quite sufficient to disguise any of the commoner poisons from human taste ; but the Venusian palate not only detected but relished most of them. Hester was particularly taken with his tomato aspic *à l'arsénique* and insisted on his preparing it in quantity for a dinner of her friends, along with his *sole amandine* to which the prussic acid lent so distinctively intensified a flavour and aroma.

While the faintest murmur of divorce, even after a year of marriage, evoked from Hester a frowning murmur of " Dossier . . . " the attempts at murder seemed merely to amuse her ; so that finally John Smith was driven to seek out Professor Gillingsworth at the State University, recognized as the ultimate authority (on this planet) on life on other planets.

The professor found the query of much theoretical interest. " From what we are able to hypothesize of the nature of Venusian organisms," he announced, " I can almost assure you of their destruction by the forced ingestion of the best Beluga caviare, in doses of no less than one half pound per diem."

Three weeks of the suggested treatment found John Smith's bank account seriously depleted and his wife in perfect health.

" That dear Gilly ! " she laughed one evening. " It was so nice of him to tell you how to kill me ; it's the first time I've had enough caviare since I came to earth. It's so dreadfully expensive."

" You mean," John demanded, " that Professor Gillingsworth is . . . "

She nodded.

" And all that money ! " John protested. " You do not realize, Hester, how unjust you are. You have deprived me of my income and I have no other source."

" Dossier," said Hester through a mouthful of caviare.

The greatest physiologist in the country took an interest in John Smith's problem. " I should advise," he said, " the use of crystallized carbon placed directly in contact with the sensitive gill area."

" In other words, a diamond necklace ? " John Smith asked. He seized a water carafe, hurled its contents at the physiologist's neck, and watched his gills open.

The next day John purchased a lapel flower through which water may be squirted—an article which he thenceforth found invaluable for the purposes of identification.

The use of this flower proved to be a somewhat awkward method of starting a conversation and often led the conversation into unintended paths; but it did establish a certain clarity in relations.

It was after John had observed the opening of the gills of a leading criminal psychiatrist that he realized where he might find the people who could really help him.

From then on, whenever he could find time to be unobserved while Hester was engaged in her activities preparatory to world conquest, he visited insane asylums, announced that he was a free-lance feature writer, and asked if they had any inmates who believed that there were Venusians at large upon earth and planning to take it over.

In this manner he met many interesting and attractive people, all of whom wished him godspeed in his venture, but pointed out that they would hardly be where they were if all of their own plans for killing Venusians had not miscarried as hopelessly as his.

From one of these friends, who had learned more than most because his Venusian wife had made the error of falling in love with him (an error which led to her eventual removal from human society), John Smith ascertained that Venusians may indeed be harmed and even killed by many substances on their own planet, but seemingly by nothing on ours—though his wife had once dropped a hint that one thing alone on earth could prove fatal to the Venusian system.

At last John Smith visited an asylum whose director announced that they had an inmate who thought he *was* a Venusian.

When the director had left them, a squirt of the lapel flower verified the claimant's identity.

"I am a member of the Conciliationist Party," he explained, "the only member who has ever reached this earth. We believe that Earthmen and Venusians can live at peace as all men should, and I shall be glad to help you destroy all members of the opposition party.

"There is one substance on this earth which is deadly poison to any Venusian. Since in preparing and serving the dish best suited to its administration you must be careful to wear gloves, you should begin your campaign by wearing gloves at all meals . . ."

This mannerism Hester seemed willing to tolerate for the security afforded her by her marriage and even more particularly for the delights of John's skilled preparation of such dishes as spaghetti *all'aglio ed all'arsenico* which is so rarely to be had in the average restaurant.

Two weeks later John finally prepared the indicated dish: ox

tail according to an elaborate and richly imaginative recipe, with the special and essential ingredient added.

Hester had praised the recipe, devoured two helpings, expressed some wonder as to the possibility of gills in its creator, whom she had never met, and was just nibbling at the smallest bones when, as the Conciliationist had foretold, she dropped dead.

Intent upon accomplishing his objective, John had forgotten the dossier, nor ever suspected that it was in the hands of a gilled lawyer who had instructions to pass it on in the event of Hester's death.

Even though that death was certified as natural, John rapidly found himself facing trial for murder, with seven other states vying for the privilege of the next opportunity should this trial fail to end in a conviction.

With no prospect in sight of a quiet resumption of his accustomed profession, John Smith bared his knowledge and acquired his immortal nickname. The result was a period of intense prosperity among manufacturers of squirting lapel flowers, bringing about the identification and exposure of large numbers of the gilled masqueraders.

But inducing them, even by force, to ingest the substance poisonous to them was more difficult. The problem of supply and demand was an acute one, in view of the large number of the Venusians and the small proportion of members of the human race willing to perform the sacrifice made by Nine-finger Jack.

It was that great professional widower and amateur chef himself who solved the problem by proclaiming in his death cell his intention to bequeath his body to the eradication of Venusians, thereby pursuing after his death the race which had ruined his career.

The noteworthy proportion of human beings who promptly followed his example in their wills has assured us of permanent protection against future invasions, since so small a quantity of the poison is necessary in each individual case; after all, one finger sufficed for Hester.

* * *

ONE GOOD TURN . . .

The other day a distinguished man of letters received this letter from a schoolboy: *In our Literature Competition I have named you as my favourite author. Please send me by return of post six reasons why.*

JOHN HADFIELD in *The Sunday Times*

TRAIN OF IDEAS

"Sure, the next train has gone ten minutes ago"

Punch, 1871

Right Away !

There's a whisper down the line at 11.39
When the Night Mail's ready to depart,
Saying 'Skimble where is Skimble has he gone to hunt the thimble?
We must find him or the train can't start.'
All the guards and all the porters and the stationmaster's daughters
They are searching high and low,
Saying 'Skimble where is Skimble for unless he's very nimble
Then the Night Mail just can't go.'
At 11.42 *then the signal's nearly due*
And the passengers are frantic to a man—
Then Skimble will appear and he'll saunter to the rear :
He's been busy in the luggage van !
He gives one flash of his glass-green eyes
And the signal goes 'All Clear !'
And we're off at last for the northern part
Of the Northern Hemisphere !

T. S. ELIOT, *Skimbleshanks : The Railway Cat*

According to Their Station

In America there are two classes of travel—first class and with children. Travelling with children corresponds roughly to travelling third-class in Bulgaria. They tell me there is nothing lower in the world than third-class Bulgarian travel.

ROBERT BENCHLEY, *One Minute, Please*

Chanson de Voyage

—Singing through the forests, rattling over ridges,
Shooting under arches, rumbling over bridges,
Whizzing through the mountains, buzzing o'er the vale—
Bless me ! this is pleasant, riding on the rail !

J. G. SAXE, 1816-1887,
Rhyme Of The Rail (A Period Piece)

Carriage à la Mode

It is only just over 100 years since . . . the date . . . June 13, 1842, on which Queen Victoria first travelled by special train from Slough to Paddington, thus inaugurating a century of travel by rail.

The Queen rode in a little saloon about one-third as long as a modern railway coach. The main compartment, measuring only four yards by three, had been converted by a Bond Street firm into a little drawing-room in crimson and white silk upholstery, with hanging sofas and picture-panelled walls.

The Royal Special left Slough at noon, with Daniel Gooch, the engine-driver-designer, and Brunel, the famous G.W.R. engineer of the broad-gauge line, on the foot-plate. But the Queen's coachman, who felt that he could not with any dignity relinquish his office as " whip," even of the iron horse, occupied a seat on the foot-plate, braved the dirt and the soot, and ruined his scarlet livery. The train was received on its arrival at Paddington with vociferous cheers.

COLLIE KNOX, *The Un-Beaten Track*

Panorama

Muscular virtuoso !
Once again you take the centre of the stage,
The flat Midlands.
The signals are all down, the curtain is raised
As with unerring power you drive
Straight to your goal.
You pull down all the Northern iron-rifted
Mountains to your knees,
Until they're pressed beneath your feet
Dragging my sight back with their weight.
You drive the landscape like a herd of clouds
Moving against your horizontal tower
Of steadfast speed:
All England lies beneath you like a woman
With limbs ravished
By one glance carrying all these eyes.
O juggler of the wheeling towns and stars
Unpausing even with the night,
Beneath my lines I read your iron lines
Like the great art beneath a little life
Whose giant travelling ease
Is the vessel of its effort and fatigue.

STEPHEN SPENDER, *The Still Centre*

Incidentally . . .

Inside the carriage it was cold and beginning to be fuggy as well. The focus of attention was a large glass bowl rather like those used in cemeteries to protect artificial flowers, but here pendulous from the roof and sheltering burners of a type judged moderately progressive at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Flanking this were luggage racks of a breadth nicely calculated to cause chronic anxiety in those below. Then came photographs : a beach and promenade densely packed with holiday makers dressed in heavy mourning : a vast railway hotel standing, Chirico-like, in a mysteriously dispopulated public square : a grove exaggeratedly bosky and vernal, bespattered with tea tables and animated by three stiffly-ranked dryads in the disguise of waitresses.

Under the photographs were the passengers.

MICHAEL INNES, *Appleby's End*

The Way to the Stars

As we rush, as we rush in the train,
The trees and the houses go wheeling back,
But the starry heavens above that plain
Come flying on our track.

JAMES THOMSON, 1834-1882,
Sunday at Hampstead

The Partisan Express

Our short train journey had an improbable dreamlike quality, which even while it was actually in progress, made it hard to believe that it was really happening. From the inside, Tito's special coach was even more like a hut than from the outside, with an open stove in the middle and benches round the wall. The stifling heat of the stove induced sleep. The benches on the other hand were just too narrow to sleep on with any security. On the floor lay Tigger, in a bad temper and snapping at everyone's ankles. At last, after a great deal of fussing and settling down, he went to sleep only to be woken again almost immediately by a Cabinet Minister falling off one of the benches on top of him, whereupon pandemonium broke loose. It was not a restful journey, but, as Tito pointed out, it was the only train in Jugoslavia in which you could travel with reasonable certainty of not being blown up.

FITZROY MACLEAN, *Eastern Approaches*

HEAVEN IS TOO FAR

"But no," said Mutti, "it is here, in life. Though not always . . ."

by SYLVIA THOMPSON

AFTER Frau Birling's second operation she became so frail she could not look after the one room she still had after letting the rest of her chalet. So she went to live with her eldest daughter, Maria, up in her big chalet that overlooked Lindern. Lindern is in one of those high Bavarian valleys, green in summer, white all winter.

The various married sons and daughters of Frau Birling had settled in different valleys among these alps except for the son Heinrich who worked as a waiter down in Munich, at a club for American Occupation officers.

Frau Birling seemed to grow smaller, and her face, that had been a brown, Italianate mother-face, plump over the beautiful bone-structure, became drawn, waxen, and aquiline; her eyelids were hollowed out in the brownish-blue, dried eye-sockets, and her dark eyes sometimes lost the liquid lively kindliness that her children had loved and remembered since babyhood. As her vitality grew less her daughter Maria's grief became harder to conceal. And if her son-in-law Willi brought her a little present when he came down from the farm in the evenings, she seemed to have to use too much strength to smile her pleasure at the new-laid egg, or the gentian just opening its dark velvet trumpet, or bluebells whose small rustled sound was like her "*aber dankeschön Willi . . .*"

On fine summer days she sat on the pine-bench against the front of the chalet. She was nearly always huddled in her black wool shawl, and nodded as if from within a shadow to the "*Guten morgen, Frau Birling!*" of people passing on the road leading up, past the corn and hay fields, to the pine woods and the far, blanched, rock precipices that razor-edged the sky.

One week when she seemed to regain strength she said to Maria, with a gleam of her old zest, that she would like once more to visit her young daughter, Heidi, and her babies, over at Oberammergau. "And perhaps Franzl"—Heidi's husband—"might get me a ticket for the Play." *Der Spiel*, she called it with loving familiarity.

" But no, mother ! The doctor says if you use your strength you will not get better so quickly."

" What do doctors know about getting better ? "

The dark, suddenly brighter glance that went with these words recalled the young woman she had been ; the Lili Birling whose lively intelligence had never respected any rules except those of the heart.

The doctor came up late that afternoon on his weekly visit. He was a brisk man from Stuttgart who sprang out of his car within the second he stopped its engine. He nodded to Frau Birling but went indoors first to speak to Maria, who was in the kitchen. The door was open. They assumed that age and suffering set Frau Birling at a greater distance from them than she in fact was. She heard Maria say, " She has an idea she must visit my sister Heidi."

" That's out of the question."

" I told her you would not allow it ! "

He came out and sat down next to Frau Birling on the bench. He dispensed the usual dose of admonishing cheerfulness and told her, with the sort of sternness one shows to a baby, that she must eat better so as to build up her strength. Then he hurried back to his car and drove down the hill. She watched him go, inattentively. Partly she was preoccupied by the beauty of the evening valley steeped in a light rosy as onion skins ; partly she was thinking out the details of her plan.

She woke exactly at five. She dressed herself in her black silk blouse, and long dark blue cotton skirt, and the fine black gabardine overcoat that her son Heinrich had brought her from Munich when he came last Christmas, and tied a newly ironed, flowered kerchief over her silken hair that was the colour of mistletoe. When she had knelt before the tall wooden crucifix, which had hung over her bed all her married years, she took her grey cotton gloves out of the drawer, and her purse, and the small shabby suitcase she had packed the evening before. She blew out the candle, and went downstairs without any sound, except when her starched skirt-folds brushed the treads of the steep wooden steps. She crossed the stone floor of the shuttered kitchen, unbolted the door, turned the key slowly, and stepped out. The sun, still behind the chalet, threw an apron of glistering plum-blue shade between the door and the road. Her heavy boots left a dark trough across it.

The sweet vigour in the air helped her to walk down the road. As she went she glanced frequently down to the roof of the railway station. It seemed very far down. She walked deftly, her small measure of strength brimming the tiny vessel of her will.

A jeep rattled up behind her; stopped. A young American soldier with the face of a baby boy leaned out. "Wanter come? *Gehen mit?* Huh? *Bahnhof?* Railroad?"

He helped her in. His stare examined her face with a troubled, baffled awe, his intuition seeing something that his simplicity couldn't interpret.

"*Bahnhof—Ja—Dankeschön.*" She gave him the smile she had for small boys. It printed something on his heart; so that he did all that could be done to make a jeep rattle down the mountain track as if it were a limousine on an avenue. At the railway station he lifted her gently out. She thanked him, and Heaven for him, in several tranquil, if unevenly breathed, little sentences that had the fine-bred mountain peasant's expressive grace of words. He watched her go and buy her ticket, and pass on to the little platform, and wait beside a bed of pink phlox whose clustered blooms were half her height.

The train was almost empty. Its few passengers greeted her, but none knew her well enough to be surprised or to detect her travelling as an escapade. Half a dozen familiar stations brought the train to the Junction, where the lake began, and the valley widened into the plain.

How often she had changed trains here: going to rejoin one of her family on some occasion for delight; or to answer some need of help—or of comfort as in Heidi's case during those three war years when her husband Franzl was missing.

It was past eight o'clock now. The air was already warm and brilliant. On the other side of the track were pines; and beyond them the lake-water reflecting the sky. She waited, and heard the burring of the coming train.

The train climbed from rise to higher rise of green, flower-bright alp. Frau Birling sat quiet but intent; using what alertness she could spare, but careful to hoard most of it. Four stations more. Now she was having to use a little of her strength against her pain. Once it became so intense that her body bent and hunched down, and she shut her eyes. Then came relief. Slowly she was able to sit upright again; but she kept her eyes shut, in thankfulness for the blessed force that, sudden as joy, had lightened her.

When she opened her eyes the mountains had gathered closer on either side of the valley, and the river was flowing and bubbling between meadows white-foamed with cow-parsley. She turned her head and observed the people about her in the train. People from the towns, the gentlemen in smart suits and the ladies with expensive blouses. And foreigners too, with their oddly inflected voices, looking out of the windows and exclaiming with curiosity.

When the train drew in they began crowding to the doors, hurrying to get porters. She waited on her seat, and then followed them down on to the platform.

Anni, aged one and a half years, rocked her baby sister in the wooden cradle. Anni's face resembled the angel carved in the head of the cradle. She sang; a vague joyful mewing chant embedded with occasional words. Her plump hand worked at the rocking, her black eyes between the cherub lids glimmered with baby tenderness. She was already maternal. She felt herself in charge of the little sister whose tiny face was like pink wax.

" Does she sleep, Anni ? " Heidi was mashing a banana for Anni's dinner. Her big-boned body seemed massive in proportion to the snug small kitchen. The muslin curtains filtered the noon from the village street outside, and filled the low ceilinged room with a milky light that fell opalescent on her russet hair and ruddy cheeks. She glanced down at the child's apple-round dirndled figure.

" *Du !* If she sleeps you don't need to rock any more ! " Her agate eyes laughed. " Come ! Have your dinner before Pappi comes for his ! " She bent and picked her up. Her hands' touch could be soft as the goose-feathers she filled her great linen *feder* quilts with, her arms were capable of heaving a block of marble. She had made the chair higher by putting on it the red velvet cushion, with the yellow satin bow, that Tante Julie had sent once from Dresden. She tied Anni's bib—" But listen— " The door-latch clicked out in the little hall that divided the kitchen from the " best bedroom " opposite. " It is already Pappi."

The kitchen door was opened, slowly.

" But—*aai* ! But— "

Frau Birling stood in the doorway, supporting herself on the door-handle.

All her life Lili Birling had made, straight and simply and stubbornly, for what seemed good. What she had made for now was in this warm kitchen. Part of it was the intent little girl, the white convexity of her bib, the gleamed flourish of her spoon.

And Heidi, her best loved daughter, whom she had so needed to see. She said, " *Guten appetit*, my Anni ! "

" *But Mutti !* " Heidi exclaimed. " But you were not to travel again, Mutti !—Maria wrote— " She drew her mother to the armchair.

Frau Birling leaned against the cushions Heidi set to her back. Her black glance was reading her daughter's russet face, agate eyes, sweet big mouth. She read zest, love, content; a blest fullness of living. The girl's big hands held her mother's, her tears were like rain on a pomegranate.

Her mother reassured her questions with, "Yes, yes! I left a letter for Maria, to tell her I will go back perhaps next week . . . But this little Anni! A year, almost, since I have seen her! *And* . . ." She turned to the wooden cradle by her chair and, as she leaned, the spinet chords of her voice twanged softly. "And this Tiny-One! that I have not yet seen! So little! And sleeps so deep—!" She watched it, soft-breathing air and time. How many thousand such breaths for her to become yet another sick-to-death old woman?

"You are *cold*, Mutti. I'll make you some good, hot *Kaffee*. One of the Americans gave us a fine tin of it." She went to a drawer in the high chest at the end of the room. "*Du!* Anni! Not to bang thy spoon so. Tell the Grandmamma what you are going to have for your dinner! Soup! eh?" Her warm voice shook.

Frau Birling turned her ravaged face, love-lighted, to the child. "*Suppe?*"

Heidi went to the stove and shifted a pan of water, but kept glancing over her shoulder at her mother.

"Banana too?"

The little girl's black eyes smiled with a vivid greedy merriment. Heidi set the bowl before her.

"She looks healthy," Frau Birling said.

"She is . . ."

Heidi's fear at her mother's looks dispersed before that sense of comfort that Mutti brought always, like a lamp into a nightmare.

"What joy it is for me to be here, Heidi. For weeks I have been secretly promising it to myself. To come here. Once again." She paused. "Also, to see, perhaps, the play tomorrow . . .?"

"But Mutti, you cannot . . ."

Frau Birling untied her flowered kerchief. Her hair, like tarnished silver silk against her skull, was fastened into a plaited coil at the back; the hollows at each side of her temples and below the cheekbones seemed to have been pressed in by a thumb dipped in bluish chalk. But her inner vivacity and warmth now vitalized each smile and made each sentence charming.

"And now here comes Franzl! I give him also a fright!—But my Franzl, how handsome you look with your beard! Eh? And well, also, you look!"

"And you too, the little Mutti!" he answered, kissing her on each cheek; perhaps seeing her less clearly, or perhaps because he saw, without terror, more truly than his wife.

They were able to give her their "best" room, which they usually let, for it happened this week to be free. On going to bed

she took the pills the doctor had given her to calm the pain that often prevented her sleep. Beyond the wide end of the bed was the small window with its check curtains. She heard snatches of singing and night footfalls out on the cobbled street. Then she slept. Then woke to hear passing steps crunching the dawn quiet as if it were snow, and, staring over the foot of the bed, watched the first light gild the chalet opposite. Its shuttered windows were festal with scarlet and pink geraniums, and the spaces of wall between them frescoed with dimmed angels on flaking clouds, and Our Lady in wan zephyrous blue draperies.

It was just after six when she went through the chilled mother-of-pearl air of the streets. Now shutters were latched back on every side and geraniums glistened up in the painted window boxes. Doors opened and groups of people came out, the women and girls knotting scarves under their chins, the men, Frau Birling observed, in costly suits, such as could be bought in cities. All were evidently visitors, and stood gazing this way and that, listening for where the chiming of the bells came from, or staring about, lifting their faces to try and catch sight of the onion-shaped church tower that would guide them to Mass.

Frau Birling went past familiar corners and along alleys between the deep-eaved houses, her heart quiet and as if furled deep within this rose-crisp morning. Near the church the crowd grew and the bells chimed louder.

All the graves in the churchyard had fresh flowers; dahlias, stocks, roses, each bloom and leaf spangled. Now she moved slowly, and still more slowly, packed in the crowd in the porch.

Inside was all light and gold and jewelled air, as though the church were a huge casket to hold joy. The gilded cherubs and angels, the frescoes high in the dome, and above the many altars, the priests in white and gold, the little boys serving in their clean linen cottas and scarlet and clumpy boots, all were caught up now in a great bright net of music cast from the gallery, singing and violins and organ reticulated in a delicate Mozartian richness. A foreign young lady stood to give Frau Birling her place. Frau Birling knelt. Next to her was a nun. Far up on the high altar the priest was praising God who gave joy to youth. Joy had grown with the years in Frau Birling like grain in wood, and all through her illness had remained more real to her than her pain. Joy now streamed down from every corner of the church so that she felt drenched in it, like a kitten in a cloudburst . . .

Coming back she took the short cut between the baker's back-yard and the house that had belonged to her grandfather. It had grown tipsy-looking from age. Her feet knew each cobble with a curious blind intimacy. Soon Heidi's little Anni would be

taking this short cut to the same school she herself had been to hardly, it seemed, more than a few weeks ago. This thought deeply comforted her heart; and gave her pleasure, too, like a red flower recurring in a pattern.

When she saw Heidi waiting on the doorstep she walked almost quickly, and called out that she hoped her "*Frühstück*" was ready.

"That you should have gone so early! And alone, Mutti!"

Gently Frau Birling refused the passion of concern in her daughter's green eyes. "It was fine! Good morning, my little Anni! Ach! And *Kaffee* once again! With what rich people I find myself!"

Her son-in-law Franzl said chuckling, "It is that you find yourself where the daughter of the family flirts always shamelessly with the American soldiers. *Eh*—Anni?" His slow-gleaming smile made the little girl put her hands over her face, and blink behind the splayed plump little fingers.

Throughout the play Frau Birling sat upright in her seat under the wide roofed auditorium. She saw scene follow scene under the sky of morning, afternoon, then evening. She watched steadily. Each scene, each character, of the familiar story was vivid to her. She reflected how every village had just such money-changers; and such pharisees; and its "clever" Thomas with his smart small-minded disbeliefs. Ah, and wasn't everyone of us at some time a Pilate, sacrificing his conscience to human respect? Or a Peter, betraying from fear? And later on it seemed to her that every mother was bereft as was Our Lady, losing her child, if not to death, to Life itself.

Every phase of the drama seemed to offer her its truth new-minted and shining. The wonderful brilliance of love: the mysterious value of suffering, not explained but given its own splendour. While restated for her by the slow crescendo of these rich-coloured, moving scenes was, perhaps, what she'd meant in her heart when she said to Maria, "What do doctors know about getting better?" Such "better" or "worse" was so merely of the body.

She could only just sit upright for that last hour towards six o'clock. And when the Crucifixion was over and the last scene of all, which could only offer, as it were, a token picture of joy and glory beyond its naïve powers of statement, Frau Birling's fingers were tighter on her rosary than she knew. For she was now badly in pain, and even as she watched the Christ exalted among his adoring buxom angels with just such a tender indulgence as she would admire the shining paper in which a grandchild had wrapped

its Christmas present, she was wondering, too, how she would manage to get back to Heidi's house.

Heidi wrote to her sister Maria, " *She is too ill to come back to you. They have taken her to the* Krankenhaus, *nearby. I visit her twice a day. Come quickly.*"

Maria wrote she would come on Saturday. She added that it was as their *Doktor* at Lindern had foretold.

Heidi sat by the high, white, hospital bed.

" Not to cry, Little-Daughter— "

Heidi blew her nose. She was a realist like her mother. But her nervous control was less, perhaps from strain when her husband was missing three years in Russia.

" I am foolish, Mutti ! It's you who should cry ! "

" But no ! Today the pain is better."

" The drugs help you ? "

" Yes."

Neither assumed optimism. They were too alike in quickness of mind and simplicity of soul, to try to deceive each other. Where Maria would have pretended her mother was getting better, Heidi, her eyes agate slits between her swollen eyelids, said, her voice suddenly hoarse and abrupt, " Heaven is too far— " She pressed her ball of handkerchief hard against her mouth and the tears glittered at the outer corners of her eyes.

Frau Birling's face was discoloured and pain-chiselled against the pillow. She answered :

" No. But *no*, my Heidi." Then slowly and wilfully she collected strength for her next sentence. " Heaven is—Heaven is here, in life. Only here it is seldom, instead of always . . . Do you see, my Heidi ? " She stopped. And Heidi saw her shut her eyes, not in pain, but with an effect of delicious wonder. " Our happiness here in Life, is only sometimes." She opened her black eyes. " Like the joy when one looks on a lover, or takes into one's arms the new-born." Her spirit seemed to grope through her exhaustion with a blind sensitive precision, to find the words. " Heaven is when one is all love—entirely delight."

All the afternoon she was deep-clouded, drugged, unconscious.

But in the early evening, when she had had the Last Sacraments, she became aware, and lay serene, and at moments even amused. When the young priest came back to see how she was she asked him if his lovely blue eyes did not bring him too many penitent old maids ?

But in the late evening when Maria and Willi came she was unconscious again.

And when her youngest son Heinrich arrived from Munich by car at one in the morning she only opened her eyes for a moment, and they couldn't tell if she knew him. He knelt by the bed, his forehead pressed down on her hand.

The night went. Sunrise dyed the white room and the faces of the dark figures kneeling or slumped on the chairs. Heinrich never moved. Heidi had been home, and, leaving her husband with the babies, had come back again. Maria said her Rosary.

Now the rosy light lapped the bed, and painted the small, seemingly wood-carved face on the pillow. The radiance must have pressed through the paper-thin eyelids, for suddenly her eyes opened to realise this glory of morning about her bed. And now her look came back to each of them, vivid, life-loving, heart-giving : the look they had all known, always. And now her words, the same words they had heard many thousand times, the words with which she had acclaimed so many hours and days, and used, so often, to crown so many small pleasures, and make them great.

" But how *splendid* children ! " she said. " How . . . splendid ! "

Then her eyes closed again. And it seemed to Heidi, and to the kneeling boy lifting his stained face, that some sea of splendour, whose great ebb and flow she had felt and loved for so many years, had swept in at last, to lift her and break her moorings . . .

Heidi moved, big, solid, silent, about her kitchen, beyond tears, and, since the funeral Mass two days before, emerged from the immense fatigue of grief into a condition where all her senses were strangely sensitive ; so that the scarlet of Anni's dress shone like light, and the warm fragrance of the bread that a neighbour had baked and brought in, seemed to fill her rather than the little low-ceilinged room. How Mutti had delighted in that very fragrance. Heidi watched Anni with her doll, and the sweet quiet in the cradle, feeling their grandmother's love air-close about them.

Consolation is not, Heidi thought. Nothing can take the grief from the dreadful going, the shutting of eyelids, the terrible stillness of hands, the silence of gone-away.

Consolation is not. But what is, what stays, is Mutti's pleasure falling like light, and like light painting for one's sight and heart the simplest things of each day ; Mutti who said once, long ago, standing back from scrubbing the kitchen table after an afternoon's baking : " But children, what is finer than my kitchen-table ! So clean ! So solid ! So silk-smooth to feel ! "

Consolation is not. Not yet. Not ever perhaps. But what is, what stays, what goes on, surely as days, is what she knew, ***die***

Mutti, in her beautiful, gay, undying heart, about a baby, an alp, a sunrise, a kitchen table.

Heidi got up and went to the stove. Soon Franzl would be in. She moved a saucepan and drew out the damper. Inside the bars the red glow breathed and began to turn gold.

* * *

RESTORATION PIECE

Those that have travelled in Italy will tell you to what a Miracle Art does there assist Nature in the Preservation of Beauty; how Women of Forty bear the same Countenance with those of Fifteen. Whereas here in England, look a Horse in the Mouth, and a Woman in the Face, you presently know both their Ages to a year. I will therefore give you such Remedies, that without destroying your Complexion shall render them purely Fair, clearing and preserving them from all Spots, Freckles, Heats and Pimples, any marks of the Small-Pox, or any accidental ones, so that the face be not seamed or scarred.

I will also preserve and cleanse your Teeth, white and round as Pearls, fastening them that are loose; your Gums shall be kept entire and red as Coral, your Lips of the same Colour and soft as you wish your lawful Kisses.

I will likewise administer that which shall cure the worst of Breaths, provided the Lungs are not totally perished and imposthumated; as also certain and infallible Remedies for those whose Breaths are yet untainted, so that nothing but either a very long Sickness, or Old Age itself, shall ever be able to spoil them . . .

Now should Galen himself look out of his Grave, and tell me these were Bawbles below the Profession of a Physician, I would boldly answer him, that I take more Glory in preserving God's Image in its unblemished Beauty, upon one good Face, than I should do in patching up all the decayed Carcasses in the World.

They that will do me the Favour to come to me, shall be sure that from Three of the Clock in the Afternoon, till Eight at Night, at my Lodgings in Tower-Street, next door to the sign of the *Black Swan*, to find—

Their Humble Servant,

ALEXANDER BENDO

Pamphlet issued by John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester, when posing as a mountebank on Tower Hill in 1673

ORPHEUS AND EURYDICE

The ancient legend retold by

REX WARNER

ORPHEUS, son of one of the Muses, the famous poet and musician, married a wife who was called Eurydice. His marriage brought him no happiness, because while his bride was walking in the deep grass with two of her friends, she stepped upon a poisonous snake which bit her in the ankle. She fell to the ground and no skill of any doctor could save her life.

Her friends, the Dryads, wept for her and filled the mountains with their cries. Orpheus himself, sitting solitary on the seashore, from day-break to sunset mourned for his wife to the sad music of his lyre. He even dared to descend to the lower world where the insubstantial ghosts flit to and fro, the terrible kingdom of Proserpine.

At the sound of the music of his lyre the ghosts came thronging in crowds like the flocks of birds that nightfall or a sudden winter shower drives down from the mountains to roost among the leaves of trees. There were mothers and fathers, the dead spirits of great heroes, boys and unmarried girls, young men who had died early and been placed on their funeral pyres before their parents' eyes. All these were penned in by the dark muddy banks of the slow rivers of Hell with their ugly reeds, the river Cocytus and the river Styx which folds in the ghosts with its nine sweeping circles.

Not only these spirits, but the very prison house and torture chambers of the dead were lulled to rest by the music of Orpheus. The Furies themselves, with the snakes twined in their hair, stood still and for the first and only time their cheeks were wet with tears. Tantalus forgot to put his lips to the water that always escaped him; the vulture paused above the giant body of Tityus and no longer pecked at his liver; the wheel where Ixion was tortured stood still; the Belides put down their pitchers, and Sisyphus sat down on the rock that he was condemned for ever to push up hill.

Orpheus stood before Proserpine and her husband, the terrible King Pluto. Still striking music from his lyre he spoke to them.

"Powers of the lower world, to whom all of us who are mortal must come in the end, let me speak to you sincerely and tell you the truth. I have not come here as a robber or to vex you in your kingdom. The reason I have come here is my wife. A serpent bit her and took away her life just as she was growing up. I tried

to bear her loss, but I cannot. Love is too strong for me. In the world above Love is a well-known god : whether he is known here also I do not know, but I think that he must be and, if the old story is true, you also were joined together by Love. I pray you therefore, by the fearful silence of your vast kingdom, give me back Eurydice, give her back the life that was so quickly taken from her. In the end we shall all come to you. This is our final home, and you rule the longest over the race of men. Eurydice too, sooner or later, will come back to you. Now I ask you as a gift to allow me to enjoy her for a little time. If the Fates will not allow this, then I have decided not to return myself, and you may rejoice in the death of us both."

Proserpine and Pluto were touched by his words and by his music. They could not refuse his request and they called for Eurydice. She was among the ghosts who had only just arrived and she came still limping from the wound in her foot.

Orpheus then received his wife back, but only on the condition that he should go in front of her and not turn his eyes backwards until he had ascended the steep path from the lower world and had reached the upper air.

So, through thick dark mist, in the tremendous silence of Hades, they took the steep path, and they were already close to the borders of the upper world, when there swept over the mind of Orpheus, in his love and fear for Eurydice, a sudden madness, something which might, one would have thought, have been forgiven him, if only the powers below knew how to forgive. Now all his toil was in vain. He had broken the conditions which savage Pluto had made and three times came the crash of thunder from the lakes and rivers of Hell.

Eurydice cried to him : " O Orpheus what is this madness which has betrayed us both ? O see, the cruel fates are calling for me again, and sleep is falling over my swimming eyes. Farewell, O Orpheus. Still I stretch out to you my feeble hands, but I am yours no longer. I am being pulled away from you, and all round me is the vastness of night."

As she spoke she melted away suddenly from his sight and disappeared as smoke disappears into thin air. Eagerly he stretched out his arms to embrace her, but his arms encountered nothing that could be touched. He spoke to her, but there was no one to listen to him, nor would the guards of the lower world allow him to cross again the river that separated him from the dead. On that river Eurydice, already cold in death, was sailing back again to the abodes of the ghosts.

For seven months, they say, Orpheus sang to his lyre in the

rocky places, lamenting his wife twice lost to him. But however rocky the place, there was soon shade there; for the trees hurried to hear his music—oaks and ashes, firs, poplars, all the trees of the woods, with vines also, ivy and climbing plants. All beasts and birds came too to listen to him. There were tigers and cattle together, wolves and sheep, eagles and trembling doves.

So Orpheus continued to sing, in pain for the loss of his wife, as the nightingale in the thick leaves of a poplar sings in pain for the loss of her brood which some rough ploughman has seen and taken from their nest before they can fly: meanwhile the mother bird mourns throughout the night and, sitting on a branch, starts again and again her sad song, and in all the country around one hears her piercing notes. So Orpheus sang, soothing the fierce hearts of tigers, and drawing trees after him.

In all this time he gave no thought to women, though many women loved him and wished to be married to him. At last, they say, a band of women, driven wild by their dancing in the mountains by night, and angry at being despised by him, swept down upon the divine singer and tore him limb from limb, scattering the fragments of his body far and wide throughout the fields of Thrace.

As for his head, wrenched from the neck that was as white as marble, the river Hebrus carried it to the sea and across the sea to the island of Lesbos. And, as the head was rolled in the river's stream, the voice and cold tongue still cried: "Eurydice, my poor Eurydice!" and the name Eurydice was echoed from the banks.

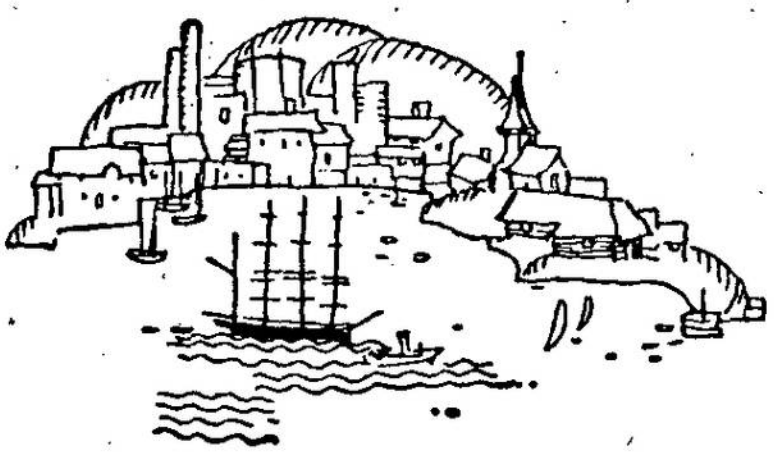
The fragments of his body were collected together for burial and in the Thracian town where his tomb is, the nightingales still sing with greater beauty than in any other place. His spirit went below the earth and, on its last journey, recognized all the surroundings which it had visited before. Searching through the Elysian fields where the blessed spirits are, he found Eurydice and caught her in his arms. Now they wander there together; sometimes they walk side by side, sometimes he follows her, sometimes he goes in front and now can safely look back at her with no fear of ever losing her again.

* * *

BASIC ENGLISH

Sometimes you've got to call a spade a spade to get it back from a neighbour.

FRANKLIN P. JONES



HARBOUR

MADONNA of the dark, the moon bestows
Her blessing on the ships that throng the quay,
Nestling by still waters, tranquilly
Oblivious of the hurricane that blows
Around them, when they wrestle with the sea,
And clouds are blackened Archipelagoes.

Where are they voyaging now, these silent hulls,
Through what wide waste of water, swept by gulls
That crowd in sparkling shoals across the sky
Or skim the flying foams so silvery?

" Oh, we are lying in strange latitudes,
Beneath a softer moon than this that broods
In cooling twilights where no wind obtrudes.
Ours was the bustle of an eastern mart
Brightly resurgent on our dreamer's chart;
The fisher-girls, and pale-browed merchants there
Bartered for gold beneath the noon's mad glare;
Then darkness came, the healer of despair,
And sleep enveloped us who roamed afar
Beneath the vigilance of moon and star."
Oh, when your irons are scrapped, and dead your men of bronze,
What crying wastes, and what strange Babylons!

HERBERT BLUEN, *The Listening Tree*

A GIRL CALLED PETER

"You're quite safe with a name like that," said the young man

by H. E. BATES

EVERY morning she rode the horse up through the park, by the crumbling empty mansion, through the long avenue of flowering limes. She was a big ungainly girl, tawny and flat-coloured, and somehow she looked too tall, too heavy and too uneasy even for the big sand-maned nervous horse.

"Give him a good working, Pete," her father would say. "He needs a good working. Don't let him dictate. Get hold of him. Be a man. Match him. You've got to match him, Pete, you've got to match him."

Each morning she rode in the same way: tensely and rigidly, keyed up, until she was out of her father's sight. The horse hammered with brittle high-strung strokes at the metal road and it was only when she got him through the scrolled iron gates and on to soft grass beneath the double mile of limes that she let him slacken into the easier, sloppier walk her father would have despised. Even then it was still she, rather than the horse, who was taut and uneasy. Her broad long legs were ungraceful in the cord breeches and the brown high boots she wore instead of jodhpurs. Her heavy riding jacket was lumpish across her square solid shoulders. If she were hatless, her tawny hair was screwed sharply backwards in a short close cut that coarsened and hardened the shape of her head.

They had called her Peter from the day she was born; and now, at twenty-three, she looked as if the final moments of girlhood had been beaten out of her. She had grown up in a house where even the windows, iron-framed and curtainless, seemed masculine things. Big oak doors stood propped open all day by lumps of fossil dug up from the surrounding clay lands, and wind blew healthily through a house of bare wood floors. Spurs rang with military harshness on broad carpetless stairs, and riding crops were hooked everywhere on picture frames. The rooms were leatherily upholstered like those of a club; large sheep-dogs lay like gaunt rugs before the fires and rose with heavy promptitude at her father's words of command.

"Up!" her father would bellow. "Heel! Up!"

Gradually it had begun to grow on her that her father really thought she was a man: that the pretence of treating her as a male, as a person to be called Peter, was not a pretence any longer. She had qualified at last for the loud, hairy, stentorian, masculine world.

"Pete!" he would sometimes yell at her across the yards, "where the hell is Johnson? Tell him if that damned mare isn't here on the dot of ten, you'll ring his neck. Pulverize him."

At first, when he had called her Peter, it was quite charming and there was a softness about it; then it had become Pete, curt and slung-out and metallic, and as the name hardened she herself hardened. Her father believed in exercise, a great deal of it, by horse, by foot, by work in stableyards, and exercise had hardened her too: so that now, at twenty-three, something wooden and inflexible seemed to exist in the tall bony body under the shiny boots, the crisp shirts, the thick riding jacket: something bloodless and unawoken and dry.

It was soon after the beginning of summer, when the limes had just flowered, that she began to be really nervous about herself. She had begun to discover she could not face people. She had got into the habit of riding as far as the mansion and then giving the horse a breather on what had once been the lawn behind the house. Huge black cedar trees rose from tall grasses and below the garden, beyond a maze of broken hot-houses, was a stream. It had been fifteen years at least since the lawn had last been mown, the hot-houses exotically heated, the white window shutters thrown back. Dry rot had begun to eat at the floors, and bright green crustings of moss covered most of the roof tiles. It was dead and quiet, and there was now no chance, everyone said, of anyone ever coming to live there again.

One morning a young man was walking across the lawn. Behind him he trailed a long steel tape measure that flashed like a tinsel snake, rattling and quivering.

She did not know what to do about this, and stood holding the horse where she had dismounted. For three or four minutes he did not notice her. In between pauses when he wrote down, in a notebook, the measurements he was taking, the long, nervous, snake of tape measure leapt about after him, glittering and alive.

Finally he stopped, and then, as he began to wind up the tape, he saw her there. She was not really conscious of watching him. What she felt was really not a question of surprise or unreality. She did not even resent him as an intruder. It simply made her more nervous and uncertain of herself.

Winding up the tape at last, he came across to speak to her. Afterwards she sometimes felt it was that snake-like jumping length of steel, slithering and sliding through the high grasses, that made her so nervous and unsure of herself that she did not know how to speak to him.

"Hullo," he said. He had cheerful pale blue eyes set under light golden brows that were always crinkling against the sun.

"Good morning," she said.

At the sound of the steel tape crackling through grasses the horse darted nervously in the air, head up, in high-strung stabs. It was one of those moments when she ought to have jabbed at him clearly and firmly, to let him see authority; but the rein slipped up through her hands.

"Tape measure," the young man said. "He doesn't like it. I'm sorry."

"Oh no, it isn't that. He's young. He has to learn. He has to get used to new experiences and—"

"Not really broken in yet?"

"Oh, yes! But he's young. He just isn't quite used to some things."

"Like tape measures."

He laughed, and next moment dropped the round leather tape-drum in the grass. Behind him ten or fifteen yards of steel dropped with snake-like clinking.

"Oh, you mustn't stop working," she said, "just because of that—"

"I was knocking off for a sandwich, anyway," he said. "It's terribly hot up here. Would you have a sandwich?"

"Well, I—"

"Quite good. My mother puts them up."

He had slung a khaki haversack on a low branch of a cedar tree. She heard him say as he went over to get it:

"I rather fancy they're roast duck. Awfully lucky if they are."

She ran her hand down the horse's nose in smooth calming sweeps and let him walk away.

"I'm going to sit under the tree. It's too hot out there." She watched him under the tent-like canopy of cedar branches, fair head glowing as he peered into the haversack. A sandwich flapped open and shut again like a trap.

"Good: they're roast duck. You'll have one, won't you?"

"I'm sure they're your lunch sandwiches, and if you eat them now—"

"If I eat them now I don't eat them later, and if I eat them later I don't eat them now. It's like everything else. You can't have it both ways."

"I suppose not."

"Why don't you come and sit down?"

Sitting under the cedar, munching on the sandwiches of roast duck, he stared at the horse.

"I don't know a thing about horses. Is he good?"

"He's quite good. Don't you ride?"

"Good God, no."

He resented the suggestion quite cheerfully, with small amiable flickerings of fair-haired brows and a graceful, slightly ironic upward gesture of both hands. In doing so he parted the sandwich, and a piece of duck fell out.

"That comes of showing off," he said.

It was because of this small pantomime of the breaking sandwich that she noticed the flexibility and grace of his hands. They were long-fingered and narrow, more like the hands of a girl.

He offered another sandwich. "Go on. I have plenty. We had two ducks yesterday. It was my mother's birthday."

"What are you doing with the mansion?" She took the second sandwich while he stared up at the shuttered windows.

"I have to do a rough survey for a plan."

"Is someone moving in?"

"Doubtful," he said. "It's much more likely they'll pull it down. Bang goes another bit of England."

He abruptly ceased bothering about the house. Instead he began to take deep, inquisitive breaths of air.

"All morning there's been that marvellous scent: I simply can't think what it is—"

"Limes," she said. "They're beginning to flower."

"It's a most exquisite scent," he said. "Don't you think so?"

She did not know what to say; she had not thought of it. In the masculine world of which she was part, no one troubled to discuss the exquisite nature of limes.

He took another long breath of lime-scented air, filling his lungs slowly, eyes half closed; and it then occurred to her, for the first of several times, that he had taken infinitely more notice of the horse, the mansion, the sandwiches and the scent of limes than anything about her. And suddenly her nervousness expanded. It became a full self-conscious anxiety about the clumsiness of her body. She was aware of being too large and too awkward in the heavy riding jacket, the big boots, the breeches that gave her legs the grossness of huge fawn hams. Beside her, dressed only in a white shirt and light grey trousers, he had a terse and quite delicate lightness.

"How long will the survey take?"

"Oh, depends. Two or three days. Depends how lazy I am."

"I can't think you're lazy."

"Terribly. I'll probably go to sleep this afternoon."

She thought of her father: "Give him a good working, Pete. Match him, Pete. Be a man, Pete. Tell that bastard Johnson you'll ring his neck. Pulverize him." She had been brought up under the incontestable notion that the male was not lazy. It did not sleep in the afternoons. It behaved like a physical steam-roller, flattening and crushing all.

"I ought to go," she said. "My horse is restless."

"Have another sandwich."

"No, really, thank you." She stood up and she saw him then, for the first time, look full at her. He looked away immediately. It was as if he had looked through a telescope and been surprised, perhaps bored, if not horrified, by what he saw.

"Goodbye," he said. "If you come up again, don't be surprised to find me having a siesta under the tree. This is a hot spell we're having."

"Yes. Goodbye."

When she came up through the park on the following morning she rode past the house, through the chestnut copse, as far as the deserted gate-lodge, before she could bring herself to ride across, as she always did, to the overgrown lawn behind the mansion. For some time she had been bored by that same ride, taken in the same way, past the deserted mansion to the deserted gate-lodge, and had not known it. She had been driven by the dull notion that it was the thing to do. "Ride him hard, Pete. Give him a good working. Don't let him dictate! Match him, Pete; match him."

An urgent stentorian masculine world of habit, breezy with open air and harsh-odoured with horse and dog, had pressed her forward with commands she had not thought of refusing. Now, because of the steel snake of a tape measure flicking through summer grass, she was aware of being unbearably lonely, more and more unsure.

The young man had worked his way down across the overgrown lawns to where, in the direction of the river, there was an abandoned swimming pool. She found him only because, even from the mansion, she could hear the tinkling of his steel tape on the glazed waterless tiles.

"Hullo," he called.

The pool was empty and he was standing down in it, peering at the feed-pipe in the deep end. All along the rectangular basin, dry white tiles glittered hotly in the sun.

"Just thinking of filling it," he said. "Nothing comes, though. It's probably turned off at the main."

"They used to have parties. They say it used to be lovely," she said.

"Do you swim?"

"Yes."

He climbed out of the pool by a half-rotten wooden ladder.

Frost had lifted many of the tiles in the bottom, and he said: "Probably never hold water, anyway." He made the little tossing gesture of abandon that had fascinated her the previous day: the hands graceful as they surrendered into air the notion of filling the pool.

"Pity," he said. "It's hotter than ever. It would have been nice to swim."

"There's a swimming place in the stream," she said. "They used to swim a lot there."

"Stream?"

"Down there." She pointed down the field that lay, bright yellow with late buttercups and white with islands of rising clover, beyond the pool. A long line of alders, spreading away tawny purple along the stream, sheltered a few brown and white cattle that lay panting in the shade. On the low hill beyond them a glassy line of heat pulsated like a transparent flame under the deep blue line of sky.

"I've half a mind to bring my things." He stood looking down at the alders that concealed, from so far up, the deep black-shaded pools of the stream. "It's worth it. I've got another day."

"It must have been lovely here when they had parties."

"Would you swim?" he said suddenly. "Would you bring your things if I did?"

"Oh, I don't know—"

"It would be awful fun," he said.

She did not know what to do or say. Another inconsequent recollection of her father urging her to work the horse hard, to give Johnson hell, to be a man, destroyed all the self-confidence she had. She felt an extraordinary downward stab of alarmed uneasiness, in the form of a hot and solid wave, go clean through her body; and then she began to walk away up the hill.

He came striding after her.

"I'm awfully sorry if I said something I ought not to have said."

"Oh, you didn't." She felt even more all the hideous, flapping, ugliness of her muscular body, its impossible ham-like legs, its bolster-like bust under the hot jacket. "I simply didn't think you meant it—"

"Of course I meant it. I think it would be awful fun." He

smiled in his free, amiable, languid way, with trembling fair eyebrows, making once again the friendly gesture of his graceful hands. "Why not?" he said.

"I'll see," she said. "It's not very likely—"

"Well, I shall go in," he said. "You can come and watch me."

In the morning she rode the horse another way, outside the park; she could not bring herself to face the hot, deserted garden, the amiable careless young man, the unbearable sweetness of the limes. It was not until afternoon that she rode up to the house; and then she did not take her costume.

It was some time before she heard the steel tape measure clinking in the hot afternoon. She heard it at last trailing in its tinny, snake-like way over gravel paths down by the empty hothouses. Soon, too, she saw the young man, bare to the waist now, jotting down measurements in his notebook beside the scalding white roofs of glass.

"Hullo," he said, "how about the swim? I had one already at lunch time."

"I couldn't find my costume. I spent all morning trying—"

"Bad luck," he said. "It's terrific down there."

Today it was so much hotter that she had ridden up without her jacket, in a cream silk shirt, mannish but soft, with black necktie; and she hoped he would notice it. He did not notice it, and she said:

"How does the survey go?"

"Almost finished. About five minutes and I'm taking another swim."

Old peach-trees, reverting to suckers, had here and there pushed their way up through broken hot-house roofs. Nettles grew in the vast derelict waste of vine-houses. She could smell an arid blistering of old paint, a hot breath of baked air from under glass. The tin snake of the steel measure did its last clicking squirm along the path, and the young man said:

"Survey finished. Thank God. Coming down?"

Some minutes later she sat under the alders, watching him making a series of dives that ended in joyous duck-paddling about the pool. His flesh was smooth, startlingly white in the alder shadow. She sat simply, without thought, watching. He had something of the delicacy of a stork, whitely poised on the pool edge, before the flashing spring of each dive. From the back there was nothing by which to tell that he was not a girl, compact and slim-hipped, and it was only when he stood beyond the dark water, grinning, ready to dive again, that the masculine shape of him was startlingly, beautifully revealed.

He came out at last to lie in the sun.

" Marvellous. Absolutely wonderful." Panting softly, face and body beaded with glittering iridescent drops of water, he lay for some time staring at the sky. " Pity you couldn't make it. Simply marvellous." He was struck by a sudden, idle thought. " By the way what's your name ? "

" Peter."

" Suits you. Who thought that one up ? "

If there was any pain in her face he did not see it ; she in turn did not answer, and he remained held in languid fascination by the sky.

" Wonderful sky. It seems terribly hot before, but after you've been in it's cool. Just right." He spoke to her without troubling to look at her. " Why don't you go in ? "

She shut her eyes, impelled by a stupid notion that if she did nothing, did not even look at anything or speak, he would come to her out of pure curiosity. She heard a kingfisher whistle like a bullet upstream, and the voice of the young man, like the bird's, seemed now to be drawn thinly away into the spaces of the hot afternoon.

" Go in while I pack my things," he said. " I've got to go up to the house again. Swim while I've gone."

She did not speak.

" You're quite safe with a name like Peter."

Her tears of anger and frustration seemed, in the moment of breaking, to turn back into her body, flooding her. She heard the kingfisher repeat its thin sharp whistle upstream, thread-drawn, fading instantly. She felt the impenetrable alder shadow unexpectedly cold on her body. For a few moments the longing to move into the sun, combined with the longing to be touched, to be spoken to and to be comforted, was almost too much for her. Her only movement was to let the palm of one hand lie in the sun, and for some time it burned there like a coal while the rest of her body, cold in the dense alder shade, waited.

" Absolutely wonderful to do nothing," the young man said. " Just nothing. Lie here and do nothing, nothing at all."

She felt her inarticulate and clumsy body drown again in an ebb of tears. Another thought of her father brought the recollection that he hated tears. " Got to learn not to cry. I can't bear it. Be a man. I won't have snivelling." Now that she wanted to cry, it was not possible, and once again, far off in the hot silence, she heard the kingfisher, briefly and shrilly, almost plaintively, calling along the water.

When she opened her eyes at last it was to be struck with the

brutal sharpness of black leaves against blue hot sky. Her eyes seemed to be shocked into fresh alertness.

"Where will you go after this?" she said.

"Thought you were asleep."

"No, awake," she said. "I'm awake."

"Oh, here, there and everywhere," he said. "Up, down and round. I take it as it comes. I go where they send me."

"Don't you mind where?"

"Couldn't care less."

She lay for a little longer, waiting. This time she did not hear any sound of the kingfisher, and there was no sound from the young man except a long sigh, and then presently:

"All I ask for is this. Lying here with nothing on my mind. Nothing to bother about; nothing at all. I'm a lazy hound."

Some time later she stood up to say goodbye. She saw that he was lying on his face. For one moment the slim spare body was lithe and graceful, and then he turned over. He heaved his chest against the sun and she saw the muscles of his thighs cramp and ripple as the legs thrust themselves outward, white and shadowless, in the long meadow grass.

"I'll have to be going," she said. "Goodbye."

"Swim made me terribly drowsy. I think I'll have a sleep," he said. "Goodbye."

She walked away up the field. She walked by the empty hot-houses, through the empty, deserted gardens to the empty house. She walked slowly, with long mannish strides, her head up. She was too far away now to hear the kingfisher, so like a small shrill echo of the tape measure in the grass, and although her eyes were clear and quite awake, she did not seem to notice the emptiness and the silence everywhere. She was aware only of her heavy limbs on the flanks of the horse; and all along the avenue, unbearably sweet, the great scent of full summer in the limes.

* * *

OUTSIZE

A man was carrying a grandfather clock down a crowded main street to a repair shop. As the clock limited his vision, he unintentionally collided with a woman, knocking her down. After collecting her composure and packages the woman struggled to her feet and coldly inquired: "Why don't you carry a wrist watch like everybody else?"

ALFRESCO

Of picnic, excursion and angels at play

Good-bye to the Town !—good-bye !
Hurrah ! for the sea and the sky !
In the street the flower-girls cry ;
In the street the water-carts ply ;
And a fluter, with features awry,
Plays fitfully, ' Scots, wha hae '—
And the throat of that fluter is dry ;
Good-bye to the Town !—good-bye !

AUSTIN DOBSON, 1840-1921, *July*

Sickening !

The fat white clouds had turned black while they were talking and were surging up in the sky, while a chill wind began to blow . . . One or two big drops fell. Kate looked anxiously up the river, but the racing craft were not yet in sight.

" Philip," said Rose, addressing her lover for the first time since the picnic began, " can't you get a boat ? My frock will be spoilt . . . Oh, Philip, you are sickening," said Rose. " It's going to pelt, and you know I'm frightened of thunder."

" I'll go up to the end of the island and yell to Lydia," said Colin. " They can't have gone farther than the weir."

He buttoned up his coat and ran off. The heavy drops were spattering on the tree beneath which Rose and her cavaliers were standing. Rose had taken off her flowered hat and was holding it in her hand.

" You are sickening not to have brought a coat, Philip," said Rose. " Isn't he sickening, Mr. Merton ? "

" Have mine," said Noel, taking off his grey flannel coat with a good pretence of willingness, and putting it carefully round Rose's exquisite shoulders.

" Thanks most awfully," said Rose. " Oh, Mr. Carter, could I have your coat to cover my hat ? It will be absolutely spoiled if it gets wet."

Everard saw nothing for it but to take off the coat and give it to Rose, who wrapped her hat carefully in it. Philip, nearly beside himself with mortification and rage, strode off after Colin . . .

The rain had cleared as quickly as it came. Brilliant sunshine flooded the landscape, and the shouts of the returning travellers could be heard . . .

" You didn't bring my coat, did you ? " asked Everard, as Rose and her admirers came down to the water.

" No. Where is it ? " said Rose. " Oh, I was sitting on it. Philip, be an angel and fetch it . . ."

When the owner put it on, everyone could see a large, damp, greenish stain on the back.

" Oh, Mr. Carter's coat must have got wet," said Rose.

" Yes, isn't it sickening ? " said Noel politely.

ANGELA THIRKELL, *Summer Half*

Picnic

Upon this theme
I'll briefly touch :
Too far
To go
To eat
Too much.

A. A. LATTIMER

The Chosen

There was, too, the annual picnic of the Wesleyan Bible Class. Each year the power of God among us waxed in early June, to wane at the month's end. The graph of membership rose steeply, declined as sharply. The picnic was in mid-June.

We would betake ourselves with the paraphernalia of cricket and rounders to some meadow newly green from the year's hay-making and there beguile a sunny hour or two till the moment came for the day's high peak : tea in a cottage garden. How well I recall one such occasion : the table of planks piled with buttered scones, and cake richly brown, oozing currants, lashings of bread and butter, pineapple chunks and stewed pears ! Tea-urns sizzled at the table's head where sat the lame old man with silver hair who was our shepherd during these ungraceful ventures into the fold ; and all about were tall hollyhocks, and beehives of golden plaited straw, and the shrill call of swifts wheeling under the blue sky. And what added joy we felt in the security of that brief paradise, when we perceived, gazing over the hornbeam hedge, one of our number who had turned his footsteps to the path of truth too scandalously late to deceive even the ingenuous shepherd who now, in a thin tenor voice, was leading us in the singing of our grace.

" Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow," we shrilly sang, and the face at the hedge disappeared as a sinner's might do who had been permitted, as torture's refinement, to peep upon angels at play.

HOWARD SPRING, *Heaven Lies About Us*

Shall I Forget—?

Shall I forget the warm marquee
And the general's wife so soon,
When my son's colleger acted as tray
For an ice and a macaroon,
And distant carriages jingled through
The stuccoed afternoon?

JOHN BETJEMAN, *Cheltenham*

Too Much

The Mole waggled his toes from sheer happiness, spread his chest with a sigh of full contentment, and leaned back blissfully into the soft cushions. "*What* a day I'm having!" he said. "Let us start at once!"

"Hold hard a minute, then!" said the Rat. He looped the painter through a ring in his landing stage, climbed up into his hole above, and after a short interval reappeared staggering under a fat, wicker luncheon-basket.

"Shove that under your feet," he observed to the Mole, as he passed it down into the boat. Then he untied the painter and took the sculls again.

"What's inside it?" asked the Mole, wriggling with curiosity.

"There's cold chicken inside it," replied the Rat briefly; "coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeefpickledgherkinssaladfrenchrollscress—sandwidgespottedmeatgingerbeerlemonadesodawater—"

"O stop, stop," cried the Mole in ecstasies: "This is too much!"

"Do you really think so?" inquired the Rat seriously. "It's only what I always take on these little excursions; and the other animals are always telling me that I'm a mean beast and cut it *very* fine!"

The Mole never heard a word he was saying. Absorbed in the new life he was entering upon, intoxicated with the sparkle, the ripple, the scents and the sounds and the sunlight, he trailed a paw in the water and dreamed long waking dreams.

KENNETH GRAHAME, 1859-1932, *The Wind in the Willows*

Lines for a Hot Day

O for a lodge in a garden of cucumbers!
O for an iceberg or two at control!
O for a vale that at midday the dew cumbers!
O for a pleasure trip up to the pole!

ROSSITER JOHNSON, 1840-1931, *Ninety-Nine in the Shade*

★*Having but recently assisted ROLAND and the Special Branch in the suppression of the neo-fascist People's Union, I, ROGER TAINE, was surprised to receive instructions to contact PINK, a former supporter of that organisation.*

On his small motor-cruiser, hidden near Poole Harbour, Pink told me he had fled to Portugal, where he had been employed by RITTER and other German friends of the People's Union in ferrying illicit immigrants to Tangier. He had stumbled on a plot, concocted by an unofficial group of ex-fascists and communists, to use cattle ticks as a means of spreading foot-and-mouth disease in Britain.

Pink, now disillusioned and anxious to rehabilitate himself, persuaded me to help him enter the house of a DR. LOSCH in Bournemouth, where we found a vasculum containing ticks. But the alarm was given, and while escaping, Pink knocked out an interfering stranger.

The next day, on my way to London with the evidence, I was kidnapped by the stranger, YEGOR IVANOVITCH, a Russian security officer who took me, blind-folded, to his hide-out. He intended to abduct Dr. Losch, and to sail abroad with him immediately, since his government considered the cattle tick plan ill-advised; and although he released me, he hoped to ensure my silence by taking my two young sons with him as hostages. In order to delay the party and rescue my sons, Pink and I decided to kidnap Dr. Losch.

The Last Part of

A TIME TO KILL

by GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

WE were away in my car at six. An early start was essential, for if we weren't back by eleven we should have to stay in that very public little harbour till the evening. Pink, knowing me to be an ignorant landsman, impressed it on me strongly that we had to race against the tide.

At half past seven we were exploring Bournemouth. We didn't care for its central police station; there was no handy quiet spot in which to leave the car, and far too much traffic. So we decided to invite Losch to Poole.

At half past eight Pink went into a telephone box and dialled Losch's number.

"Dr. Losch?"

"Speaking."

"'Ere's the doctor for you, sergeant," he roared. "And yer tea's getting cold."

I swallowed and twice tried to speak, and then my nervousness passed.

"This is Poole Police Station, sir," I said. "Very sorry to call you so early in the morning, but we should be grateful if you could come down and identify a man."

Losch seemed thoroughly flurried. Yes, yes, he'd be delighted to. I told him that unfortunately our cars were all out, but if he would take a taxi we would refund the fare.

"For how long will you require me?" he asked. "I am expecting a caller."

"Not for more than ten minutes, sir," I answered, "and then we will run you back."

He hesitated a moment and agreed to come at once. I came out of the box soaked in sweat from collar to socks.

"For the lord's sake tell me what he looks like," I said to Pink, for I had only seen Losch with his back to a lighted room.

"Oh, you can't mistake him. Medium all over. Medium fair. Medium tall. Medium solid. Fleshy mouth, and wears glasses. Looks like any other middle-class German."

I went into the station and hung about at the entrance, explaining that I was waiting for my brother who wanted to report the loss of a watch before going down to his office. The wind had gone down, and blue sky was spreading from the west—a reminder that by nightfall both sea and air would be calm for travellers, and that I had only the rest of the day in which to find Ivanovitch and my children.

Losch drove up a little after nine. He was indeed a colourless, obstinate medium; but I had no doubt that he was my man, for he was more than mediumly nervous. I let him pay his taxi and come half-way up the steps of the station. The driver, thank heaven, didn't hang about.

I greeted Losch briskly, and carried him along with me down the steps. When we were out of earshot of the doorway, I introduced myself as Sergeant Rogers of the C.I.D., and began a stolid, long-winded apology for a change of plans. We had had great difficulty, I said, in collecting a few men with beards to line up with our suspect. Parkstone station had now rounded up half a dozen, and, as it was easier to take the prisoner over there than to transport all the other beards to Poole, I would, if he didn't mind, take him to Parkstone.

I kept pouring forth explanations until we turned two corners into a lane behind the station where I had parked my car. Pink was in the driving seat reading a newspaper, his recognizable nose turned away from the pavement.

I opened the door and allowed Losch to enter. Then I snapped: "Constable, you are on duty!" as if to rebuke my driver for his sloppiness in not at once relinquishing his paper.

" Sorry, sergeant ! Thought I'd found a winner for Ascot ! "

Pink came to attention in his seat. I don't think Losch was quite happy. One plain-clothes policeman might pass, but he must have expected the driver, at least, to be in uniform. I kept talking cheerfully about the burglary—trying to reassure him by my exact knowledge of times and places—and told him about the fight our man had put up before he was arrested. I described a wholly imaginary boat that he lived on, and said casually that he appeared to be a gentleman and had come from Tangier.

That had Losch thoroughly worried.

" I don't think the man I saw could be described as a gentleman, sergeant," he said. " I don't think you've got the right one."

It was sticking out a mile that he didn't know whether he ought to recognise Pink or not. That was hopeful, for it meant he hadn't had any instructions before coming down to the police, and therefore that neither Ivanovitch nor any of his men were within easy reach.

I had him so worried that he didn't remark on the roundabout but just possible route to Parkstone which we were taking. When, however, Pink turned away down the main road to Dorchester and the west, Losch took notice.

" This is not the way to Parkstone," he said sharply.

" Damn, I wasn't looking ! " I exclaimed. " Still dreaming of Ascot, constable ? "

That was the signal for Pink to choose the nearest place where we could have a moment's privacy, even the open road if it were clear. He apologised, went on a hundred yards and turned into a narrow lane which led to a boatyard.

As soon as the car stopped, Pink and I jumped out and changed places. He plunged in through the open door and took Losch by the throat before the man had time to yell. Then he crashed down beside him, and rammed an open Norwegian knife against Losch's ribs.

" Put your hands in your pockets, and keep 'em there," he ordered. " And stay in your corner or this goes in."

The car lurched as I reversed out of the lane. I heard Losch give a stifled cry.

" I told you to keep in your corner," said Pink. " Goes in easy, doesn't it ? Now, Losch, no bluff ! We know quite well that if you're found dead it will be put down to your Russian friends, not us."

" Who are you ? " Losch asked.

" Police, my lad. But not the kind of police you thought."

Losch began to bluster.

" Come off it ! " Pink ordered. " You've burned up your cattle ticks, so we can't bring you to court. But we're quite happy to deport you—or bump you off if you prefer it."

THAT was the end of the first act, which, Pink had insisted, was his sort of business ; and indeed I was far more ready to trust him than myself. The mention of cattle ticks had reduced Losch to a medium jelly. It was now my turn. I stopped the car, and turned round to address him.

" Dr. Losch, you will understand that it is not convenient for the government to have any knowledge of your existence, so my orders are to deport you privately. If you come quietly, you will be landed on the coast of France and left to get in touch with your friends as best you can. If you do not come quietly, the port police,"—the idea of port police at West Bay was laughable, but he didn't know where he was going—" have orders to detain us all and afterwards to hand you over to me. In that case I shall have no alternative but to take you away and dispose secretly of your body. Is that clear ? "

" Hypocrites ! Blasted hypocrites ! " Losch screamed. " I always knew. And you had the impudence to talk of Hitler's atrocities ! "

" Hands in your pockets," Pink reminded him.

I drove now with a good deal more confidence. One likes to keep the speed under forty when one isn't quite sure what may happen on the back seat. In order to avoid Dorchester, I went through Weymouth, where a last squall of thundery rain was driving the holidaymakers off the front and tying up the traffic, and then out on to the Bridport road where at last I could race that falling tide to my satisfaction.

Between Bridport and West Bay, with the sky clear, Pink saw a constable standing by his bicycle and taking off his wet cape.

" Stop, sir ! " he said to me. " There's our man ! "

That was a typical bit of Pink's daring. I sweated at what might happen, but I stopped.

" What's the weather in West Bay, constable ? " he asked mysteriously.

" Sea's going down fast, but no day for a swim yet," the policeman answered, grinning.

" All laid on, eh ? That's splendid ! " said Pink.

I drove on before he had a chance to embroider further. His move was terrifying, but a beauty—for it was absolutely essential that Losch should give us no trouble on the quayside.

He did not. We had him out of the car, into the pram and on board in two minutes. Then I drove my car to the hotel garage where I had left it the previous night, and came back to find Pink dancing with impatience.

It was only half past ten, but the swell from the bay was dropping *Olwen* a foot nearer the bottom than she should have been, in its silky and hardly perceptible troughs ; they were perceptible enough to Pink, and his softly steaming language left no doubt of it. Once we touched, and the water around us was suddenly thick with mud. Then *Olwen* cleared the breakwater and pounded her bows into a genuine green sea, and Pink cursed more happily.

The powerful Diesel drummed softly as we rolled southwards. *Olwen* wallowed as confidently as a cheerful porpoise, and Losch began to look a bit green. We took him out of the cabin into the fresh air of the well.

" It's probably a more comfortable crossing than you would have tonight, Dr. Losch," I said.

" About the same, I should think," he answered.

That was so promising a reply that I made the mistake of instantly slamming in a direct question.

" Where were you starting from ? "

He looked me up and down with a faintly impertinent curiosity. It was the first time that he had regarded me as if I were a human being like himself, and not a mysterious creature of unknown powers.

" I do not know."

" What were your orders from Yegor Ivanovitch ? "

" To stay at home."

" You are a member of the communist party ? "

" Of the German communist party," he corrected me.

" Are there many agents like you ? "

" You ought to know," he replied insolently.

He was winning all along the line. He must have assumed at first that we had rounded up Yegor Ivanovitch and his whole crew. My questions had now shown him that we had not.

" From whom do you normally take your orders ? "

" From my superiors in Eastern Germany," he answered emphatically.

" It was they who told you to establish those cattle ticks in England ? "

" I know nothing of any cattle ticks," he said.

" This man at the wheel—didn't he get some out of your house the night before last ? "

" This man at the wheel," he replied with a growing lack of respect for me, " remarked earlier that he could not bring me to court."

I tried another tack. " Was it Yegor Ivanovitch whom you were expecting this morning ? "

" It was."

" What were your orders for tonight ? " I asked.

" I might be able to tell you that," he sneered, " if you had sent for me to the police station an hour later than you did."

" Oh, to hell with him ! " said Pink, exasperated. " Take the wheel, Roger, while I go and heat a few things in the galley ! "

He seized Losch by the back of the collar, propelled him down the companion and through the cabin, then hurled him into the glory-hole in the bows and locked the door.

I WOULD not like to say whether Pink, when it came to the point, would have been capable of carrying out his threat. As for me, if ever I wanted to torture anyone, it was Losch—both for the crime he was ready to commit against my country, and the contempt with which he had regarded me, lounging, positively lounging, on his seat. Now that we had arrived at the decision, however, I found that the brute's flesh was sacred to me. I can't think of another word. My whole ethical training, my system of taboos and religion and chivalry, vague as most men's though they were, forbade torture even for the sake of my children. At the time I was ashamed of this weakness. I put the matter to Pink in quite another light.

"If we ever have to hand him over," I said, "he mustn't be marked. And I'm not sure that it's safe to drop him overboard till we know the police have not traced him."

"Got to break him down somehow," Pink insisted. "What made him turn nasty?"

I answered that I supposed it was good communist morale in the face of obviously unskilled interrogation.

"I can deal with that communist morale," said Pink, "if only you can hang on to your own."

He turned east. With the sea behind her, *Olwen's* motion eased. When Portland Bill lay on the beam and about four miles distant, I saw white water ahead and asked Pink whether the wind was getting up again.

"That," said Pink, "is Portland race. Now, don't be alarmed. This is all for Losch's benefit."

Alarmed! I should have been in a complete panic if Pink had not looked so mischievously calm. The seas had no shape or regular movement at all. They charged each other, and the white-topped, green columns spouted into the air, as if the shock of wave against wave was unyielding as that of wave against cliff.

"My God!" I shouted. "Will she do it?"

"Oh, she'll do it all right," Pink answered. "I'm only playing about on the edge. If anyone has got his glasses on us, he's going to think I'm an escaped lunatic."

He played about on the edge, as he called it, for twenty minutes.

"Have a look at Losch now," he said.

I staggered through the main cabin, hanging on to the table, and opened the door of the glory-hole. It was a small forecastle, of about four feet by seven, set between the cabin and the chain locker, and occupying half the width of the ship. The outer side of the one bunk had been built up to hold light but bulky stores. On the floor were coils of rope, fenders, paint-pots and floats for moorings.

Losch was sitting on a folded awning, with a paint-pot, no longer empty, between his knees.

"What *is* this?" he moaned. "What *is* this?"

The bows rose and fell a good ten feet, and I laid my breakfast before him.

"Just a bit of a lop," I replied. "Where would you like to be landed in France?"

I thought his answer might give me a line on Yegor Ivanovitch's destination.

He glared at me and retched. "Where you please."

"All right," I said. "No hurry. There's another ten hours yet, and we can always cruise around a bit."

I shut him up again and lurched back to Pink.

"Got you down, too, has it?" he remarked. "I was afraid of that."

I yelled at him that I couldn't help it and didn't give a damn. That was true. It had done me good to see Losch, even though my stomach didn't think so.

"Any luck with the communist morale?"

"Not yet."

"We'll try a little cat-and-mouse act then."

He took us out of the race—not, I think, without difficulty—and *Olwen's* bows dipped and rose in the regular run of the ebb tide from Portland to the Start. It seemed to me like release from purgatory.

I had another look at Losch. The paint-pot had upset, and he had made no attempt to pick it up or find another. He sat with his head in his hands, drawing deep breaths of relief.

"Is that all of it?" he asked, as if to a fellow-sufferer.

"Oh, well," I answered, "with the wind against the tide, it comes and goes, you know."

I returned to the well and reported that we had, at last, a certain moral superiority.

"Back we go, then, and bust him," said Pink. "Courage, Roger!"

He put *Olwen* in the race for the second time. A great, formless ghost of foam crashed on the turtle-deck forward, and streamed away. Then the stern and half the length of the ship lifted clear out of the water. I never heard the screw race. Pink was a superb seaman, quick in anticipation.

"Short circuit somewhere," he announced. "Do you mind working the hand pump a bit before you talk to Losch?"

I worked that beastly pump for a quarter of an hour, and showered upon it, I swear, long-forgotten meals. I still didn't care. Even when the swoop of *Olwen* seemed to leave me suspended in mid-air, stomach and mind were determined to outlast Losch.

"Have another try at him now," said Pink, "before he goes unconscious on us."

That glory-hole was a hell of movement. For Losch it was like a butter-churn, except that he was never actually upside down. He had slid off his folded awning on to the floor. It was no place to lie; but his self-respect was finished.

"You said there wouldn't be any more. You said there wouldn't be any more," he accused me.

"One never knows," I answered, and gave him the rest of what I had, though God knows where it came from.

That was the last straw. "I am dying," he moaned.

The sweat and tears burst from him as he tried helplessly to relieve his nausea.

"A better death than Yegor Ivanovitch would have given you," I suggested grimly.

"No, no. I am of value. He said so."

"Nonsense. You would have a gun at the back of your neck the moment you stepped into that black van."

"The black van," he wailed. "Leave me alone. I know nothing of the black van. I've never seen it, I swear to you. It was to pick me up at the Haven Ferry.

"When did Ivanovitch tell you that?"

"This morning on the telephone. Leave me alone, man! I don't know anything. I only met him the night before last. Leave me alone!"

I kept on questioning him while he grovelled in filth and begged for peace. He hadn't expected any caller at all: he had told me that merely as a precaution. Ivanovitch had telephoned him half an hour before I did, and ordered him to be at the Haven Ferry at eleven, where, on the far side, he was to get into a black, plain van. After that he was to accompany Ivanovitch abroad. He swore that he did not know how, nor from where. I was convinced that at last he was whimpering out the truth.

"Got anything?" asked Pink on my return.

"Get us out of here and let me think."

The fact that the black van was to be on the far side of Haven Ferry meant—as soon as we were peacefully rolling again in sane water—a great deal to me. Assuming that Yegor Ivanovitch didn't want his van to be seen at Losch's house or in Bournemouth, there were still dozens of possible rendezvous on the outskirts, from which the roads fanned out to all Dorset and Hampshire. The ferry, however, was the nearest way from Bournemouth into the Isle of Purbeck, and a very long and unnatural way of getting anywhere else. Thus there was a strong presumption that the house where my children were held was somewhere on the peninsula.

Now, as county agent for my firm, I knew all the roads of Dorset, and at once I asked myself whether the few scrappy details I had picked up on my journey in the van could fit Purbeck. They did. The steep hill with hairpin bends could have been on the road from Corfe to Kingston. The short, level run was then east or west of Kingston, and the rough road downhill either dropped to the sea near Worth or Worbarrow, or perhaps dipped into the vale behind Swanage.

It wasn't much to go on. I had limited the possible area to perhaps twenty square miles of country, but those miles were full of lonely farms and cottages. Then I had an inspiration. Why had they put cotton wool in my ears? What was I not supposed to hear? The sea. The answer could only be the sea.

I put my argument to Pink, saying that the only flaw in it which I could spot was that the van must have gone through Wareham, and I was sure we hadn't passed a town.

"If you drove in from the north and went slap down the main street," he answered, "you wouldn't have noticed it. Now what about those oil lamps you mentioned? Any help there?"

So far as I remembered, the Isle of Purbeck was pretty well electrified, but certainly the cottages and farms which lay down by the sea at the end of cart-tracks had no electric light.

"It's a nearly sure bet," I said.

THE glass had been rising steadily since dawn, and the wireless prophesied an anticyclone with light easterly winds. Pink thought he could risk anchoring at Swanage. We would then explore inland on foot.

He turned up channel, cutting across the tip of the race, now comparatively innocuous as the time of slack water approached.

" Mackerel and bacon sound all right ? " he asked. " You take the wheel while I cook 'em. Keep her straight for St. Alban's Head."

He went below and routed out Losch with a roar that reminded me of hard-case American mates in the sea stories. He stripped him to his shirt and hurled his revolting outer garments overboard. Then he gave him two buckets and a scrubbing brush, and set him to cleaning out the glory-hole.

I began to feel faint stirrings of optimism. The sea had turned a summer blue, and against it, ten miles to the east, St. Alban's Head stood up like a vast, misty, yellow mountain. The smell of bacon from the galley was glorious to a stomach as empty as mine.

Losch wouldn't eat ; he only wanted to sleep. So we moved the stores down from the bunk to the now spotless floor, and let him climb up. Then Pink and I did justice to the mackerel, and smoked and watched the grim Purbeck coast open up to port. I had never seen those grey cliffs from the sea before, and I said that they must have been terrifying in the old days of sail.

" Lord, no ! " Pink replied. " If a skipper had weathered Portland and St. Alban's Head, there was nothing here to bother him. And in calm weather it's been a pretty busy coast in its time."

That was true. The sheer face of the cliffs and the terraces and ledges beneath them were largely the work of quarrymen. From the inaccessible caves cut in the rock face, like the holes and perches of a dovecot, blocks of Purbeck stone had been lowered into barges and taken by sea and river to build the cathedrals of southern England and London itself.

" Good smuggling coast, too," said Pink. " Some of those ledges are like quays."

" If Yegor Ivanovitch is using someone like "—I was a bit embarrassed—" well, the sort of thing you met at Tangier, could his skipper send a boat ashore at Seacombe or Winspit or any other of those ledges ? "

" Of course he could, given a dark night and fair weather and a hand in the dinghy whom he could trust. Look here—if the job was urgent and there wasn't much sea running, I'd guarantee to take half a dozen chaps off any of those ledges "—he waved a hand at the forbidding and apparently sheer face of the cliffs—" and pick up my dinghy and be off to sea in twenty minutes without a single bloody coastguard being any the wiser."

WHEN we rounded Peveril Point into Swanage Bay, Pink stopped the engine and fell upon the sleeping Losch. We tied up his hands and feet, and gagged him with a field-dressing strapped across his mouth by plenty of adhesive tape. We had to make a port, we told him, for repairs to the engine, and he could go to sleep again without fear. Then Pink put into Swanage, and persuaded a local fisherman to let us tie up to his moorings.

We dressed ourselves from Pink's wardrobe to resemble a hearty

pair of holiday-makers. I put on sun-glasses, and Pink concealed the shape of his nose with a dab of lint and sticking plaster. In Swanage we bought two knapsacks, and stuffed them to a proper bulkiness with loaves and sweaters. Neither of us could possibly be recognized at a distance, and that was all we wanted.

All this took time, and it was four in the afternoon before we left Swanage. There were still five hours of daylight, however—enough, if my theory were correct, to identify the house or the black van or both.

We strode fast over the bleak uplands between the main road and the coast, stopping only to investigate scattered farms and cottages. Often their upper windows looked out upon a horizon of empty sea, but they were set back too far from, and too high above, the cliffs to hear the waves in the strong wind of the day before booming into the quarrymen's cuts and over the flat ledges. No house would really fit my guesswork.

We struck a little inland and followed the road until we reached a small village where the pub had just opened. We sat down in the bar and ordered a couple of pints. As it was a Saturday evening, three or four quarrymen were quenching their thirst already, and a couple of obvious summer visitors were starting early on their gin.

The landlord seemed to be a cheerful and communicative soul, so I told him that a friend of mine was staying somewhere in the neighbourhood, but I didn't exactly know where. Had he seen a shabby old black van going through the village the day before, and down to the sea ?

" Don't come down for lobsters, do 'e ? "

" No," I said, " not that van."

" Then there's only Mr. Firpin's van, what sells vegetables," said one of the quarrymen positively. " 'E goes down to Mr. Fallot regular."

That wouldn't do either. It seemed to me to stand to reason that the black van couldn't be a regular visitor to the village. This Mr. Fallot, however, appeared to have a house on just the sort of site I wanted. I asked who he was.

" Come down for week-ends. Ah, and any time he can get off, I reckon," answered the landlord. " Big Birmingham jeweller he is, they tell me."

" Does he have people to stay with him ? "

" Not as you might say, stay. He 'as 'is friends, though."

" My friend might have sent his children down in a grey saloon," I suggested.

" Big grey motor-car, was it ? " asked the quarryman. " I saw a big grey motor-car down to Mr. Fallot's this morning."

" Sure it wasn't yesterday ? "

" 'Course I'm sure it weren't yesterday."

" Children in it ? " I asked.

The quarryman didn't know, but one of the summer visitors took his pipe out of his mouth and remarked :

" There was one child in it. I saw the car go through the village."

I remembered George's habit of always going to sleep curled up on the back seat during a long journey ; he couldn't be seen.

The evidence was muddled, inexplicable, illogical, as any other attempts to make clear sense out of human activities, yet it was somehow promising. Pink and I finished our pints and went away over the fields to have a look at this Mr. Fallot's house from the other side of the valley in which it lay.

THE house had been built in the between-war years ; little could be seen but a belt of shrubs, and behind them a squat face of Purbeck stone which was as natural a part of its surroundings as any quarrymen's cutting. Indeed, the house looked as if it had been built on the floor of a shallow quarry. That was hopeful. Underground rooms or cellars could easily be formed out of the old diggings.

From the end of the valley track, above which the house stood, a narrow gully led down to a ledge of rock. This was surrounded by a crescent of cliffs, about three hundred yards across the horns. The ledge, formed by the cutting away of all the overlying stone, fell in a series of low steps to the sea. Old iron rings, cemented into a roughly squared slab and rotten with rust, showed that the place had once been a handy quay to those who knew how and when to use it.

So much we saw during a casual walk along the cliffs and a scramble out to the edge of a low promontory from which we could look into the crescent. To keep watch on Mr. Fallot's house was far more difficult.

The steep side of the valley opposite the house was smooth enough for a man to slide down two hundred feet without tearing his trousers. A few stunted trees and thorns crouched in the hollows, and on the slopes were sparse patches of gorse and bramble ; but there was no real cover.

It took a good deal of innocent wandering and lying about in the sun to find the shelter we wanted—an old Home Guard trench cut precariously on the edge of the cliff, from which there was a fine view, through friendly grass and thistle, of Fallot's drive and front door. We pretended to admire the evening light on the water, and lay around like ecstatic townsmen, and not once did we look at Fallot's house until we had gradually disappeared into dead ground and so into the trench.

The house leapt close in the field of Pink's magnificent glasses. There was nobody about. On the drive, which perfectly fitted my memory of a short, sharp slope, I could see the recent tracks of cars. A chimney was smoking. The place had no electricity or telephone.

After about twenty minutes a man and a boy came out of the front door and went to the garage. But the boy wasn't Jerry or George, and the man I had never seen before. He took a large grey car out of the garage. He then stood at the front door saying goodbye to his host, and him, too, I had never seen before. They made a happy group together. I turned to Pink, yelping curses and obscenities. We had wasted an hour and a half.

" Come on, old son ! Let's not miss a lift ! " said Pink.

We raced down the slope and were standing on the valley track

when the man and his son drove past. He willingly gave us a lift up the hill. They were so happy, those two, excited by the wind and sun of the day. I asked, hopelessly, if he had seen another grey car with children.

" Odd that you should ask that," he replied. " We certainly did, didn't we, Jo ? "

" That poor little chap who was frightened," said Jo.

He was only about nine himself, but a thoroughly fatherly small boy.

" When ? " I snapped.

The father looked at me with surprise.

" When we were driving down yesterday. Just like a grown-up, I said what a naughty boy he was. And Jo explained that he wasn't naughty ; he was frightened."

" Where ? For God's sake, where ? "

This admirable chap stopped his car and turned to me.

" They were parked by the roadside near Kingston, and we passed them about mid-day or a little after. Two men and two boys in a grey car. I say, is there anything wrong ? "

I pulled myself together. " I'm sorry," I said. " The fact is I'm a bit over-wrought. A spot of trouble in the family. Would you mind running us up as far as Kingston ? "

AT Kingston we easily got on to the track of my car. It had been parked on a quiet bit of road outside the village between twelve and two the day before. What had happened was now clear. After dropping me at the house, the black van had returned to Kingston ; and the children, when they arrived, had been transferred from car to van. Enquiries about a plain, black van led us only to Mr. Firpin again.

We offered a drink to our kindly driver and ice-cream to his son. They had both been fascinated by all this mysterious asking of questions.

" Look here," said the man, " don't think I want to butt in or anything, but aren't you police ? "

Before I could reply, Pink took his nose out of his pint, and whispered : " Revenue."

You couldn't have doubted him. His tough face, brown above and red below, where two days' sun and salt had whipped the skin long protected by his beard, could only have been that of a criminal or some adventurous officer of the state ; and since he had never lost his naval eyes nor his general air of authority, criminal was out of the question.

" After smugglers ? " whispered our friend, and his son's eyes glowed in the setting sun.

" And bigger than that," Pink answered. " Now, sir, I think you yourself could help us a bit."

The man seemed somewhat startled.

" Fire away if you've anything to ask," he said.

" When did you arrive at Mr. Fallot's ? "

"This morning about ten. We stayed last night here at Kingston."

"He asked you to come today?"

"Well, not exactly. Any Saturday, he said, if I liked to bring the boy down to the sea and have some lunch."

"Did he look at all worried when you arrived?"

"No," said the man doubtfully, "not worried, really. Busy, perhaps. He kept us waiting a long time before he opened the door. But then he was cordial as you could want. You don't think there's anything wrong with Fallot, surely?"

"Lord, no!" Pink lied. "I just wondered if he would be the right sort of chap to help us. Might be useful with a house right on the sea. Have you known him long?"

"Off and on, since the war. I buy a bit of stuff from him, you see. Theatrical jewellery and such-like. That's my business—masks, fancy dress, fireworks, and so on."

"Do you buy watches from Fallot?"

"I do not," the man answered. "But if ever you wish to prove it, here is my business card!"

"Does Fallot sell watches?"

"Yes, naturally. Well, gentlemen," he said rather sadly, "I must be getting on."

I tried to cover Pink's sudden change of manner by the sincerity of my thanks. There was no more I could do without giving away his offensive imitation of a suspicious revenue officer.

When the grey car had driven away, I fear I showed temper. Self-control was growing a bit thin, in any case, as the sun went down.

"Can it, Roger!" Pink said, unmoved. "This is what I was after. Fallot may be in the same sort of jam that I was. Suppose he is smuggling in a big way, and suppose some old cloak-and-sickle got to know of it. Right! Then, Mr. Fallot, you're going to run what we like when we like, as well as your bloody watches. Or else!"

I told Pink it was absurd conjecture, and demanded evidence.

"Firpin's van," he answered. "Look here—we've asked about the black van till we're hoarse. Nobody's seen it, and everybody's seen it. Now, I'm a chap who likes to accept what's under his nose without looking any farther. It's Firpin's van that you and your children travelled in."

I said wearily that I couldn't believe in my fellow Dorsetman, Firpin, Fruit and Vegetables, Deliveries Daily, handing over his precious old van to the Soviet Secret Police.

"It's a damn sight easier than believing Yegor Ivanovitch is God Almighty," said Pink, "and can whistle up ships and plain vans whenever he likes, and use 'em without any cover. I tell you he's got Firpin in his pocket.

"Lord, Roger, it's just like those communists! They blackmail two perfectly decent smugglers, and before the poor chaps have time to look round they find they've become proper criminals and are doing whatever they're told to do. Even so, I bet you anything, they don't know it's a political gang they are working for."

Well, it was possible. But was Firpin's chief or partner Fallot?

If Pink was right, and if his smugglers had to accept any yarn that was served up to them and didn't know in whose power they were, then any of those seemingly innocent cliff-top farmers were as likely as Fallot.

Pink had to agree, but stuck to his Birmingham jeweller. It was well known, he said, in Tangier, that a man could soon retire on the proceeds of running watches and jewellery into England.

IT was now half-past eight. We could not call in the police. Help from them on any scale big enough to be effective was inconceivable; we had not the evidence to be convincing, and we had not the time.

We had, at any rate, details sufficient to take action ourselves. Pink could not prophesy any hour for the arrival of whatever craft was coming. He himself would choose, he said, half tide or low tide, when the pattern of the ledges would be clear and a dinghy could be paddled in as easily as to a quay. Our objective was to delay the embarkation by frightening off the ship. I was to watch Fallot's house, and, meanwhile, Pink would take *Olwen* to sea and watch the two or three miles of coast to eastward, where there were other possible houses, even lonelier than Fallot's, and other rock ledges accessible from the cliffs. We reckoned that we could upset the nice timing of their arrangements—merely, for example, by holding any strange boat in the beam of *Olwen's* Aldis lamp—and that by dawn we would have proof solid enough to bring in the police, and search and cordon the whole district.

Pink jumped on a bus and went down to Swanage. I struck across country in the last of the light, aiming for the side of the valley above Fallot's house. There was no one about.

First of all I fixed in my memory the exact point on the cliff path which was directly above two huge cave-mouths cut by the quarrymen. Pink knew their position and thought he might even be able to pick them up in his night-glasses. He was to keep one eye on the skyline above the caves for my flashes of light in case I wanted to signal to him.

When it was already deep dusk, I wriggled silently down over the turf slope until I was on the edge of the rough cutting in which Fallot's house had been built. The front of the house was hidden from me, but I could see anyone who stepped away from it into the drive; and over my right shoulder I could watch between the headlands a black arc of sea. It was a perfect position—murderous if I had had a rifle and a legal right to use it. As it was, I had no weapon but Pink's Norwegian knife which he had insisted on leaving with me.

Fallot's house seemed abnormally quiet and dark for a place where the owner was at home and presumably enjoying whatever after-dinner relaxation he fancied. There wasn't a sound until, about eleven, somebody opened the back door and put the cat out. This innocent, domestic act gave me a moment of utter despair. There was I, fooling about on a dark hillside when my boys were in imminent danger.

The unknown lit a cigar and took a couple of turns round the

garden and down to the gate, where he stood apparently listening. Then he returned to the backyard and picked something up. I couldn't see what it was. The night was black velvet.

He strolled down to the gate again, and out. I thought that he might be going down to the ledge to finish his cigar by the edge of the sea ; but instead of following the little ravine he turned right and started to climb the cliff path. He was using a torch to see his way. As he came up to my level and passed within fifty yards of me, I watched the narrow pool of light travelling briskly along the ground.

The cliff path seemed an unnecessarily difficult route for an evening stroll, so I decided to follow him. I squirmed back from the awkward slope where I was lying, and then struck straight up the escarpment over the soundless turf. From the top I looked down on to the path, but there wasn't a glimmer of torch or cigar. Cautiously, I crept a little nearer to the cliff.

After a bit, I heard a crackling of sticks well below me and to my left, and moved towards it. The unknown struck a match. I dropped to the ground and tried to resemble a large lump of darkness, for I was within thirty feet of him. Paper caught, sticks flared, and a fire of small logs began to waver and grow. The man then threw a handful of some chemical on the fire, and the flame and column of smoke turned reddish, yet not so red as to be wholly unlike an ordinary fire. Twice he fed it with his powder, then gathered the logs together to give a steady flame, and cleared off down the hill as if the devil were after him. I saw his face clearly in the glare ; it was Fallot.

I had no doubt what that fire was for. The site of it was cleverly chosen—a flat platform set back into a second step of the cliffs. The fire couldn't be seen at all by the coastguards on St. Alban's Head to the west, and was fairly sheltered from the east. And if it *were* seen, what was it but a summer camper's fire over which to grill his sausages ?

I let the light of Fallot's torch disappear over the edge of the hill, and then I rushed down and kicked those logs out of the fireplace and stamped on them. I thought I saw two sudden and questioning flashes of light from the sea, but they were so quick and so far from the direction in which I had been looking that I could not be sure. A rough compass bearing showed them to have been west-south-west.

It was now my turn to do a bit of signalling. I trotted along the cliff path until I was above the two great caves, and found a long, low gorse bush which would prevent my light being seen from the south-west. Pink's position was east by south of the caves.

IT was hard to decide what to send him. A single flash meant that he was to come in quietly and join me. Three flashes in quick succession would tell him to hang about in the offing as publicly as possible, with all lights lit. That, I reckoned, would certainly cause the strange craft to sheer off, but what might happen up at the house ? If the party in Fallot's cellars—for I was now sure it was there my children were held—chose to escape in the black van or on foot, what

on earth could I do to stop them in the awful blackness of the night ?

I came to the conclusion that I needed Pink, and needed him quickly. I sent him single flashes. At the fourth my signal was acknowledged by a double speck of light impossible to notice unless one were staring out to sea along a compass bearing. In so vast an emptiness that tiny flick of humanity was comforting as fireplace and friend.

I made my way down to the ledge. As soon as I was past Fallot's house and off the turf, I had to feel twice with each foot before I dared set it down. Loose stones, old scraps of wire and slippery shale in the gully made vile going for a man who didn't want to be heard or to show a light. It must have taken me as long to reach the sea as for Pink to creep in two miles to his anchorage.

Close to the water there was a little more light, a spectral glimmer provided by the swirl and suck of the waves. I could distinguish the miniature deck, half natural and half split by Purbeck quarrymen, where Pink, if he could find it, intended to land. I walked out along its western arm, and then as far on as I could get over a spit of rock left bare by the falling tide.

I distrust the sea. Its romance in a sunlit, summer haven may pass ; its reality, its own dark life among the recesses of a coast, is melancholy and alien, and the sea which crept in out of the night and lifted the long strands of weed and plunged back with a smooth, gurgling surge of force was menacing and incalculable.

After a long wait, I heard at last the plain, familiar sound of oars. It came from the west, the direction in which I did not want to show a light ; so I returned to the solid footing of the ledge, and tried to get within speaking distance. I was just going to risk a low call to Pink, when a voice from the sea muttered :

" *Verdamte Fallot!* "

I hoped that the unknown German was cursing Fallot because the beacon fire had gone out just when most needed.

The dinghy followed the gleam of lightly broken water into a narrow passage that opened between the ledge and the western horn of the cliff. I came up close and, when I heard the sculls shipped and the crunch of the rope fenders, dropped into a handy crack among the limpets and sea anemones. I could just distinguish a tall figure in a white yachting cap who came ashore, and padded away in the direction of the ravine and Fallot's house. He left behind him a seaman in charge of the boat.

When all was quiet again I went back to the little rock basin and showed a light low down on the water. I could only pray that Pink would approach from the east and land where he should. If he did, I thought it unlikely that the seaman, sitting two hundred yards away, alone in his dinghy among all those noises of bottomless drain-pipes, would hear him.

I NEEDN'T have worried. When Pink came I didn't hear him myself. He was paddling the little pram with a single stern oar, and had muffled the gunwale over which it passed. There wasn't a creak or a splash as his head came to rest within a couple of feet of my own.

I told him quickly what had happened. He agreed with me that the skipper of the craft lying somewhere in the outer darkness had come in to get some sort of beacon going again, if it was only his own electric torch. Since his ship didn't dare to show any lights, he couldn't find his usual anchorage without help from shore ; and more, said Pink, if he couldn't guide her in to where he wanted her, he would have a tough time finding her at all when he tried to return on board in the dinghy.

" What about you ? " I asked. " Where's *Olwen* ? "

" Close in under the cliff," he replied.

I said that I had never noticed the beat of the Diesel, and he chuckled with satisfaction. It was his seamanship, I think, which gave him self-respect enough to carry him through personal loneliness and disaster. He explained that he had never used his engine once he was round the point, and had nicely calculated that what wind there was and the set of the ebb-tide would carry him close in to the ledge. He had unshackled his anchor and bent a cable on to it instead of the chain, and the two had gone down without a sound.

" Roger," he said, " it's unlikely, you know, that your friend in the yachting cap has more than one dinghy."

" We'll give the general alarm if we pinch it," I objected.

" Oh, I don't think so. The night is so bloody dark, and their plan has gone wrong, and nobody knows where anyone else is. Muddle 'em some more—that's the game ! Skipper is on shore. Dinghy and hand vanish. No way of finding out what's happened without flashing enough lights to make even a coastguard put down his pipe and think ! What was the chap in the dinghy doing when you left him ? "

" Just sitting."

" Well, you know how to get up close to him, so you'd better do the job. And I'll be handy in case of accidents."

He took a cosh from under his sweater and handed it to me. It was just a steel bar wrapped round with tow.

" That's all I could make on board," he said apologetically. " Now, don't kill him. He's earning his living like the rest of us. Just a flick will do."

Pink moored the pram to what remained of an iron ring, and followed me silently over the ledge. The man was still sitting in the dinghy with his head on a level with the rock. I didn't hit him quite hard enough, and he came round soon after we had worked the boat out into the open sea. Pink, however, quickly lashed his hands together with the painter, and threatened urgent death if he opened his mouth.

I rowed for five minutes into the softly heaving blackness until Pink ordered me to ship the sculls and we glided up alongside the dim white hulk of *Olwen*.

On board Pink questioned the seaman, who understood a little German and a little English. He was some kind of refugee from the Baltic. Poor devil, he is on my conscience. He didn't deserve his end ; yet I do not see what we could have done to prevent it. He

admitted that the yacht had been smuggling, but insisted that he had only been on board a month, and was not in the confidence of the owner—to whom he gave some name that I forget. He couldn't, naturally enough, tell us exactly where his ship was. He reckoned she was something less than a mile off shore when he rowed the owner in. Her name was *Fiammetta* and she was reasonably fast and a good sea boat. There was one other hand beside himself, who acted as mate when required and could bring the ship in to her anchorage as soon as the skipper gave a light to steer on. There was no other dinghy.

We tied him up and put him in the glory-hole with Losch. Losch seemed to be resigned to his fate. His eyes, which were all he could move, followed our doings with contemptuous interest. He must have guessed that we were in serious trouble, and been thoroughly satisfied. Pink had given him food, drink and a cautious airing when he was clear of Swanage.

We rowed the dinghy back along the cliffs, and left it in a bit of a cave on the extreme east of the ledge, where it was highly improbable that the skipper would ever look.

It was now after midnight. Fallot's house was dark. We waited and waited. Once we saw two moving lights in the black sky, which might well have been up on the cliff near the spot where Fallot had built his fire. Once we heard, without a shadow of doubt, the distant beat of quiet engines.

It was an uneasy wait. Why was nothing happening ? Yet there was no object in leaving the ledge for Fallot's dark house ; we couldn't attempt to break into it, weaponless, against the opposition of Yegor Ivanovitch and his now considerable party. And during that hardest wait of my life, I knew that my children were in shouting distance of me, and yet might be lost by a shout.

I looked at my watch—an hour and a half since the skipper had landed. Long ago he should have signalled *Fiammetta* into her usual anchorage and started to ferry his passengers out to her. That was the moment we longed for—when men would be on the ledge who dared not show a light, men panic-stricken because the dinghy was not there. I felt pretty confident that in the confusion I could get my darlings into the pram and away.

AT last the skipper returned, and alone. We heard him coming, and he was evidently in a hurry, stumbling and splashing carelessly across the ledge. He came to the cut where he had left his man and dinghy, and flashed a torch over the empty water. Then he called : " Jan ! Jan ! "

I felt Pink's body stiffen beside me.

The skipper turned towards us, cursing in a low, furious voice, and Pink launched himself out of the pool like a leaping fish.

" Ritter ! " he shouted.

Or was it a shout ? To one listening on top of the cliff the noise might have been no more than a sudden and savage recoil of the sea.

He was at the man's throat before I could stop him or even

clearly remember his deadly, justifiable hatred of Ritter. They splashed together, Pink uppermost, into the water of the narrow passage where the dinghy had been moored. The channel swallowed them, and returned to its sullen heaving and swirling. Then, at the short limit of vision, I saw two hands break the surface, one holding a pistol and the other clasped over it. I dived in, but the submarine battle had moved away. When I grabbed at a hand which touched my face, I felt only a long ribbon of cold weed.

There was a flurry at the lower end of the passage, and a wet back was outlined by froth and bubbles. When I swam to it, I found only a white yachting cap bobbing in the disturbed water which broke back from the rocks. Then they must have got their feet on solid bottom, for their heads and shoulders reared up with the fury of fighting seals, and someone flung the pistol to shore. The only voice I heard was Pink's—a coughing roar that shot the water out of his lungs. Again there was silence, and the sea pulsated between the confining rocks. Pink swam up the channel, and climbed, gasping, on to the ledge.

"Fixed the bastard," he said.

I hoisted myself out behind him, and he whipped round with fingers outspread for my throat. When he saw who it was, he asked:

"You've been in, too, damn you?"

I said I had done my best, but couldn't find either of them.

"Find? Find?" he cried hoarsely. "No one will find him but the crabs. My God, and I suppose you'll blame me again now! I've killed Ritter, I tell you; and I don't care!"

I quietened him as best I could. I was so thankful to see him, and I left no doubt of it. I would have preferred, it is true, that his personal feud with Ritter hadn't come up to complicate my own desperate quest; but mine was already so complicated that it was beyond telling whether Ritter's death in the darkness was for good or for disaster.

Pink clung to me—not, I mean, with his great arms, but with that momentary spiritual agony of the soldier who has been let in for something beyond his powers and succeeded, and wishes to God that he were dead, and covers it all with stupid laughter. And, of course, his loyal conscience was tortured. He knew very well that he had pulled a Pink on me at a critical moment.

This particular Pink, however, had acquired a Luger with ten shots in the magazine. That was itself a temptation to closer action, and closer action was necessary. Why had Ritter been going back alone? Had the transfer of passengers been given up? Or—probable and past bearing—had it been successfully accomplished somewhere else?

We went up to Fallot's house. To my surprise, there was now a light in a downstairs window. We crept round the blackness of the house wall, and looked in through the curtains. Fallot was thrown back in an armchair, his hands dangling, his eyes half shut, in an attitude of infinite relief that told us more than all the mysteries

of the night. He was a pale, podgy man of fifty, and after putting up such active visitors I dare say he felt it.

The window was open at the bottom. I pushed it up, and Pink went through with the Luger pointed at that very fitting target.

Fallot thought at first, I believe, that these two savage, dripping arrivals were some of his own guests. He started a whole string of incoherent protests.

"I haven't left the house," he cried. "I haven't seen a soul. I won't talk. I swear to you that . . ." and then at last he seemed to realize that he had never seen either of us before. "But who are you? Is one of you Losch?"

"What do you know of Losch?" I asked.

"Only that I heard them say . . . they wondered if I had warned him . . . they sent me to telephone . . ."

He went on squealing as if there could be no more hope in the next world than in this for crooked jewellers of Birmingham.

"There are two children here, Fallot?"

"There were. Yes. Belonging to one of them. I don't know anything. I had to do what I was told."

"And how many men?"

"Five. But they're not here. Not here any longer."

"Where are they? On board?"

He didn't want to admit that he had any knowledge of a ship. I drew the knife that Pink had given me.

"Yes. They've gone," he screamed.

I was mad with fury and disappointment, and I think I might have killed him then and there if Pink hadn't quickly interrupted: "What? Sailed without Ritter?"

Fallot pretended he didn't know who Ritter was. Perhaps he did not. He whined that it was a long time since he had known any names. The skipper, he said, had gone back to his ship in the dinghy.

ALL this took less than three minutes. In the fourth minute Fallot was showing us his cellars. He didn't dare to deny their existence. He knew that death had come up from the sea into his room.

In his sleeping quarters at the back of the house was a large built-in wardrobe. He unlocked the door and pulled out the parquet flooring of the cupboard in a single block. Beneath it was an ordinary trapdoor of deal.

Pink grabbed him by the collar so that his body was a shield, and made him lift the trap and light the hanging lamp beneath it. We saw a steep, narrow flight of a dozen steps leading down to a roughly squared chamber. Three sides were of natural rock; the fourth side of solid stone walling in which were doors.

We leapt through those doors one after another, Pink leading with Fallot in his left hand and Ritter's Luger in his right. There were three rooms, and they were empty. One was that in which I had been confined;—it must have been Fallot's office for the inter-

viewing of very private guests. The next was a cellar or warehouse, and had a safe in it. The third had not long been vacated. It was foul with cigarette smoke. Dirty plates, empty bottles and full ashtrays stood on a table of packing-cases. The room had been hastily furnished with deck chairs, plain kitchen chairs and two camp beds. I made a quick search, for Jerry could be trusted to leave something behind him wherever he stayed. I found his tie. He had been amusing himself by weaving it in and out of the laces of the canvas bed.

"Where's the way out, Fallot?" Pink ordered. "Jump to it, and remember that you're going in front of me!"

Fallot didn't like it at all. He tried to persuade us that, of course, there was no way out but that through which we had come. In the warehouse, however, was a locked door like that of a cupboard. I burst it open. Within were cold, damp and silence.

Fallot insisted that the space was only an old quarry chamber. I twisted his arm till something jumped out of its socket. I—well, I do not look back on that night with any pride. But I think the children's mother, gentle though she is, would have done much as I, if the strength and training had been given to her.

With Fallot's limb revoltingly loose, we got a civil answer to questions. He told us that the quarry workings came out on the cliff face, some fifty feet above the sea. Immediately below the opening were two and a half fathoms of water at low tide. I gathered —for he was not always coherent—that there was an emplacement for a winch at the mouth of the quarry, and that he had received small consignments without ever knowing the name of the ship which brought them, or seeing more than vague movement on a deck below.

How did he know, Pink asked, that all the party was on board? He didn't, he screamed. That was the trouble; some of them might still be waiting at the mouth.

Why wasn't he there? They didn't want him. All he had to do was to wind up the cable when they had all gone, and put the winch back, before daylight.

Pink wouldn't give up the Luger, so he went first—behind Fallot, that is. The passage at first was roomy, at least eight feet across and as much high. It sloped a little upwards, and my compass showed the main gallery to be more or less parallel to the ledge, and bearing west. Then we came to a narrow and very rough cutting, the floor steep and uneven and strewn with chips. This must have been made in the great eighteenth century days of smuggling to connect together two systems of quarries.

After a minute or two of this dismal corridor, which wasn't much larger than a coffin set on end, we came up into a well-cut gallery, and then into the main level of the second system. My torch showed a space like the crypt of a considerable church, its roof supported by pillars of piled stone. We were under the small headland which formed the western horn of the crescent around the ledge. Fallot led us out by another gallery which sloped very slightly towards the sea.

We were following the track along which the blocks of stone had been moved by levers and rollers to the face of the cliff.

We had a fair idea of what the end of the gallery would be—a mouth like those of the two caves above which I had signalled to Pink, but smaller, less conspicuous from the sea, and certainly no place for any sort of struggle.

As we approached the sea, the cleaner, warmer air was very welcome, and we shivered less in our wet clothes. They were a nuisance, those clothes. We couldn't move quietly. Every step was a loud squelch.

From the darkness ahead of us, someone called sharply : " Who is that ? "

" Me ! Fallot ! " he answered, quickly prompted by Pink.

" Who is with you ? "

Pink put on an imitation of Ritter's harsh voice.

" Ritter ! My man has gone off with the dinghy."

IF it had not been for the challenge, I should never have noticed that we were nearing the end of the gallery. It showed only as a square of blackness defined against the other denser blackness. We were allowed to advance a few more steps, and then the figure at the entrance turned his torch on us.

We were at the limit of the beam and in single file close to the wall, so he couldn't see much. I reached an arm over Pink and Fallot, and blinded him with our own light. He was Yegor Ivanovitch, standing erect in the middle of the opening.

" Kill him if you can," I whispered quickly to Pink.

Pink fired and missed. At the shot both Ivanovitch and I snapped off our lights. The position was not healthy. We had no sort of cover, whereas Ivanovitch could jump in and out of the quarry mouth as he liked.

He was still doubtful what to make of us.

" Don't be a fool, Ritter," he shouted. " This is I, Yegor Ivanovitch. Fallot, who is with you ? " he asked again.

I applied a little too much pressure to the arm, and Fallot screamed: " Ritter, Ritter, Ritter ! "

That terrified shriek was the end of all possible bluff.

" Shine a light on your faces and come out," ordered Ivanovitch. " If you don't, I fire."

We dropped flat alongside the wall of the gallery. The shot ricocheted off the floor and went howling into the depths. I reckoned that Ivanovitch was using some light weapon like a .32. That was all to the good. If he had had a tommy gun or machine-pistol, he could have squirted bursts into the tunnel and been fairly sure of bagging us with direct hit or ricochet.

As we dropped, Fallot broke away and dashed down the passage, shouting his identity. Ivanovitch shot him dead as soon as he reached the mouth. Personally I should have preferred to hear what Fallot had to report ; but Ivanovitch was taking no risks, and, I expect, had been itching to bump off his very shaky ally for the last twenty-four hours.

"I shall not leave you behind, Ritter," he threatened. "Come out, or I'll get help and fetch you out."

The red stab of the pistol had come from the right of the cave mouth. I whispered to Pink that I was going to crawl along the angle of floor and wall, and that he should keep his covering fire high. Ivanovitch could not know that there were two of us, and, if Pink could stop him showing his head or a light, there might be a chance of getting a knife into him before he ever did know.

I silently took off my shoes and coat and trousers, so that I could move unencumbered by drippings. I had about fifty feet to cover, and I told Pink that I was going to do it mighty slow.

Pink gave me a couple of minutes and then fired two rounds. Ivanovitch replied at the flash, and I saw more or less where he was—behind a black something at the quarry mouth. I crept on until I reached it. There cannot have been more than three feet between myself and him, but the three feet were of solid stone.

My eyes, after the absolute darkness of the quarry, were more at ease on the edge of the outer world. I could see the rock platform beyond the entrance to the gallery, and the winch and Fallot's body. The block of hewn stone between me and Ivanovitch stretched diagonally across the mouth, and was about the size of a single wardrobe lying on its side. If he chose to lean over it, he couldn't avoid seeing me; if he didn't I had a chance of working round the end.

I followed along the inner side of the stone, inch by inch. Pink at this moment was inspired to fire a beauty which clipped the top of the block and must have encouraged Ivanovitch to keep his head down. I got my shoulders past the end of the barrier and out into the open, and then came to a full stop. Instead of the clean-cut stone beneath me, I felt rough grass and chippings. I could crawl no farther without making a whole variety of little noises, and I hadn't a hope of reaching Yegor Ivanovitch over the top of the block.

The terrace or platform at the mouth of the gallery ran out for some ten feet. I could see the two lines hanging down from the winch into space. Fallot's body lay crouched on its side in an unnatural position that a touch would disturb. I stretched out my left hand and pulled his boot. The body collapsed, and I made another foot under cover of the noise. Yegor Ivanovitch paid no attention.

Both Fallot's boots were now within my reach. Indeed they blocked my view and obtruded themselves upon my consciousness. It was safe to assume that Ivanovitch had done a bit of execution before—for all I know, his branch of the Russian police may have to do a two weeks' course of it for promotion—yet he couldn't be wholly sure that Fallot was stone dead. True, he had fired at a yard's range, but the man had been in movement and the bullet was light.

I twitched the two boots in a gruesome imitation of Fallot's last expiring kicks. Ivanovitch hissed some curse under his breath, and made no move. He thought he knew what it was. I had not misjudged him.

Fallot's kicks gave me the last couple of feet that I dared take. I could now jump clear into the open round the end of the stone; but then to turn behind it and get at Ivanovitch was asking for trouble. It was a risk that I should have possibly taken in war. Now, however, with the certainty that my children would be lost for ever to Cecily if I failed, I wanted something better.

Pink fired another shot for luck. After that the silence was complete. My back felt very naked. To see it, Ivanovitch had only to move to what I may call the neutral corner of the stone. I tried to convince myself that he wouldn't, for he must surely think that if he stood full in the mouth of the gallery, he would be outlined against the night sky behind. In fact the night was too dark for any clear outlining, but that he could not know.

I decided to have a go at Fallot's boots again; if Yegor Ivanovitch's nerves weren't any better than my own, the delicate, intolerable sound might exasperate him into coming within reach. I was right. He could stand the twitching no longer. He crawled on hands and knees along his side of the block, and reached forth a hand to draw Fallot into cover, where he could deal with him.

As soon as his head was fairly out, I gave him Pink's knife between the shoulder blades. It wasn't quite enough. I am now ashamed that I was glad it wasn't enough. I turned him over and allowed him to see who I was, and to watch the steel as I drove it into his throat.

I shouted to Pink to come up, and crawled to the edge of the cliff. It overhung the sea. Almost directly below me was the dark arrow of *Fiammetta's* bows. She was held by two stern anchors. A bosun's chair was just over the edge of the platform, ready for Ivanovitch. The line passed round the drum of the winch and down to the deck, so that he had only to step into the chair to be lowered. There was no sign of the children, and not a hope of getting down to the ship. In an access of fury I wrenched Ivanovitch's pistol out of his hand, and gave his body a heave and dropped it on two men who were standing by the lower end of the line. Unfortunately they looked up and saw it coming. The body landed on the forecastle hatch, and smashed it in.

This savagery did not pay. *Fiammetta* went astern, and Ritter's mate could be heard shouting orders to his passengers. There was an angry argument, dominated and finished by a voice which commanded the mate to get out of there and leave the traitor Ritter behind.

"Quick!" Pink exclaimed. "Quick—for God's sake!"

I slipped on my shoes and grabbed my clothes. We dashed back up the gallery and into the main workings, where we had a horrible minute trying to find the right way out. Then we stumbled through the narrow connecting shaft, out into the lower quarry and so to Fallot's house. It took us nearly a quarter of an hour.

Pink panted that we shouldn't lose hope, that Ritter's mate wasn't going to leave his anchors behind, that he couldn't be at both wheel and capstan himself, and that his passengers were sure to make a mess of the tricky moorings.

We raced through the house and down the ravine to the ledge. Pink hurled the pram through the water, manhandled her into the well and on deck, buoyed and slipped his cable ; and in twenty-five minutes from the time we left the quarry mouth *Olwen* was sliding through the calm sea on the improbable quest of intercepting *Fiammetta* somewhere to the south.

PINK, however, refused to call it improbable. If *Fiammetta* was bound down channel, her course was known, for she had to go south in order to pass clear of Portland and the race ; if up channel, he reckoned that she would still hold a southerly course to reach the safety of the three-mile limit before turning east.

" He'll show his lights some time," Pink insisted—though I could tell by his voice that it was more a hope than a sure opinion. " Why shouldn't he ? He's clear of the land, and he's no reason to expect anything on his tail. He'll be fussing over his charts in the wheel-house, and he'll have to see to read 'em."

He kept on mumbling to himself and peering into the utter blackness. *Olwen* was showing no lights at all.

Fiammetta, as our captured seaman had told us, came over from Le Havre, but there was no ground for assuming she would return there. She might be bound for any port in Belgium or France where there was a strong communist organisation capable of receiving Yegor Ivanovitch's special mission, and speeding it on its way to the east. And I think they all would have reached those friendly hands—minus Ivanovitch, that is—if a streak of complex illumination had not come tearing up Channel from Portland on His Majesty's business. She crossed our bows a mile or two ahead, and Pink muttered that if *Fiammetta* wasn't showing her navigation lights, that cruiser would have put the fear of God into the poor bastard at the wheel.

It did. On the starboard bow, at a distance I wouldn't attempt to estimate, we saw the red and white of a small craft. Both Pink and I were sure that only darkness had been there before the passage of the cruiser ; so the presumption that these were *Fiammetta's* lights was strong.

" Hell ! " said Pink. " Stern chase ! And that man in the glory-hole told me she could do sixteen knots."

" And *Olwen* ? "

" About eleven. But *Fiammetta* won't do more if she hasn't got to, Roger. She can't have too much fuel, and her present course looks like Ushant."

We sped steadily on over the quiet sea, and the limit of our world was the white water creaming away from the bows. The lights came nearer and nearer, and after half an hour we had them on the beam and, as it seemed to me, close to—though Pink said it was all of a mile.

" Now get this clear, Roger," he warned me. " If the hand in command of *Fiammetta* spots that we're after him, it's the last we'll ever see of her. I can't ram her, because your children are below, and we mightn't get them out in time. The only mortal way I see

of stopping her is to board her. Take the wheel while I interview our friend below."

Pink came back in a few minutes with full details of *Fiammetta's* plan. He could get anything he wanted out of a fellow seaman. When he had water all round him he was a far simpler and more gallant character—nearer to his true self—than the erratic, disappointed creature of the land.

Fiammetta was built as a pleasure cruiser. She had an all-enclosed wheelhouse amidships, with the saloon and galley forward, and the owner's cabin and bathroom aft. There was a roomy forecastle with two bunks in it, which was entered through that forehatch which Ivanovitch's body had splintered.

" Could be worse," said Pink, " but it's like trying to board a bloody greenhouse. How much ammo. have we got ? "

" Five in the Luger, and four in Ivanovitch's pop-gun."

" What is it ? "

" Nine millimetres, I think."

" It's mine," said Pink, grabbing it. " And I've got a spare magazine. More than you deserve, my lad, after pinching my gun that night in Bournemouth ! "

Then he wanted to know what sort of a shot I was with a pistol. I could tell him honestly that at close range house-to-house stuff I used to be pretty efficient.

" If they take a look at you," he said, " they won't wait for you to use a gun at all."

I hadn't considered my appearance. I had washed my hands overboard when we rowed out to *Olwen* in the pram, but that was all.

" Your face is as black as a nigger's," Pink told me, " but it's going to show nice and crimson when there's some light. Now, what I'm going to do is this : I'm going straight for them, and I shall blind the helmsman with the Aldis lamp. That's your moment—and you won't have more than five seconds before they're into us or past us. You'd better take my gun because we have ammo. for it, and you may have to shoot away the glass before you can bag the helmsman. What will happen then, I don't know. But I'll try to tie the two ships up without doing too much damage. Objective is to take the wheelhouse and keep anybody below from coming up top. We ought to get two of them before they start shooting, and then it's only three against two. O.K. ? And now lash the sculls into that pram ! "

Fiammetta was now on the starboard quarter, and her green was at last visible as well as the red. Pink closed and closed, and at last he ordered me to lie down on the deck and get ready. *Olwen* heeled over in a tight semi-circle and we foamed towards the lights. Pink switched on the Aldis lamp, and I saw *Fiammetta* racing towards us not more than two hundred yards away.

WHAT happened then was all so quick that I have little idea of the sequence. I remember *Fiammetta* altering course to starboard, and Pink going to port. I smashed the glass of the wheelhouse—

and saw the helmsman raise his hands to his eyes. Then, or before, Pink roared, and there was a crash that nearly flung me overboard. I concentrated on my part of the job, shot the helmsman dead, and changed the magazine.

"Board, you . . . !" yelled Pink.

It was nearly too late. *Fiammetta* had cut right into our bows, and *Olwen* was down by the head and seemed to be slipping off into the sea. Pink leapt over me and jumped for *Fiammetta's* fore deck. I followed him and missed my footing, but got a good half of me on board. By the time I had picked myself up, Pink's assault on the wheelhouse had failed.

The lights were on in the saloon, and illuminating the wheelhouse from below. The four men had tumbled up in a hurry, and slammed the door which Pink was rushing. He dropped to the deck just in time to avoid a regular curtain of fire. I fell back on sound infantry tactics and took cover behind the fore hatch and Ivanovitch's body, which no one had bothered to clear away. The party in the wheelhouse put a few more shots into Ivanovitch, but they were lit up and I was not, and I got two of them. The third made a dash for the door, and Pink slugged him with his iron bar as he dived out. Number Four dropped into the saloon to put out those murderous lights, and stayed there.

That looked very nasty for the moment, since anyone who entered the wheelhouse or tried to winkle him out was at his mercy. He had forgotten, however, the two forward ports of the saloon. Once those were smashed in, he had to watch them as well as the wheelhouse. And so at last we had the ship to ourselves.

The owner's cabin was locked. Yegor Ivanovitch, like a good civil servant, had reserved the best accommodation for himself and his personal affairs. We broke down the door. There on the bed were my two boys, asleep and lightly drugged. I thanked God for it. None of that horrible work nor the appearance of their father need ever remain in their memory.

On the table was the vasculum. Pink examined the contents at much greater length than was necessary. He could, as I've said before, be tactful as a woman in the face of another man's extreme emotion.

"Shall we take them to *Olwen*?" I asked him.

"Well, Roger, you certainly go all out for the business in hand," he said. "There ain't been no *Olwen* for the last ten minutes."

"And Losch and that seaman?"

"Pretty clean sweep, isn't it?"

His fingers were playing drum-taps on the lid of the vasculum in the most exasperating manner. I took stock of myself. I had to admit that my violent trembling wasn't due to cold, as I had thought. I asked Pink if Ritter would have whisky on board.

"A vat, if I know him," Pink answered.

I said I would look for it. I didn't want Pink to go through that wheelhouse and saloon again till he had to. My own share in that mess was justified. I hadn't a doubt of it. But Pink—I could see

that, for the moment, he might find it difficult to call up a clear-cut motive; they were too many and too obscure. He had served himself, but even for him—especially for him, as I now know him—that was no excuse for piracy and murder. He had served his country, but his country had not asked for his devotion and did not want it. He had served his friend, but it was he himself who had landed that friend in disaster and violence. As I picked my way towards the whisky, I swore that I would allow Roland no rest until Pink had been given back a right to be of use, free of fear and free of disgrace.

When I had the bottle—and another for emergencies—I removed the four corpses from the wheelhouse down to the saloon, and shut the door on them. Then we had a stiff drink apiece, and I tried to say how sorry I was for the loss of *Olwen*.

"Let her go," Pink replied bitterly. "I don't know if you'll understand, Roger, but I hated her. Or not her, you see, but that cabin. Week after week. Alone in it."

Fiammetta rose to a bit of a swell, perhaps the last of the wash of some great liner far away in the darkness, and we heard the water rush and gurgle in the bilge.

"She'll do for a while," said Pink in answer to my alarmed look of enquiry. "There's not too much damage. I think we could get her into port if we really set ourselves to it."

HE sounded confident, and *Fiammetta's* engines were ticking over smoothly in neutral. I was becoming unpleasantly conscious, however, that my two boys and Pink and I were a long way from land with no boat.

"I suppose we wouldn't be in any serious trouble with the law if we brought her in, thanks to that—", he tapped the vasculum in which those much-travelled ticks were still lively. "But, my God, it isn't fair to stick the police and politicians with a floating morgue like *Fiammetta*, if we can get rid of her. What do you think, eh? You're always yapping about the best service being no use without tact."

I asked him what on earth he proposed. I wasn't going to push my two children ashore in lifebelts. He answered that it had occurred to him that we might find ourselves—if we found ourselves alive at all—with no *Olwen* and a badly battered *Fiammetta*.

"And that, my lad, is why I didn't secure the pram," he added with the proper pride that his foreknowledge of the sea always called out of him, "and why I told you to lash the sculls in her."

"We'll never find it," I protested.

"Why the devil shouldn't we find it? Only got to look up wind. There isn't much of it, but we may have drifted a little farther than the pram."

Pink rigged a light, and *Fiammetta* slowly cast up wind, zig-zagging like a busy hound. We came first of all on our wet clothes, which we had thrown down on *Olwen's* cockpit grating, then on a boat-hook and the cushions, and at last on the pram-floating bottom

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up. Pink fished for her painter, and we hauled her up out of the sea, emptied her and made her fast astern.

The eastern sky now had streaks of grey and the sea was just visible, like very cold, dark pewter. Pink ran *Fiammetta* to the north, doing a cautious five or six knots. She made water very slowly, and it was plain enough that we could bring her in if we wished. I must admit that, when I thought of the four of us in Pink's eight-foot pram, I was all for doing a hearty spell at the pump and sticking to *Fiammetta* as long as possible. Pink wouldn't have it. He pointed out that visibility was now a good half-mile, and that at any moment we might be seen.

We raided Ritter's wardrobe for clean clothes, and wrapped the children in blankets and brought them on deck. They were breathing quite naturally, and I didn't think it would be long before they woke up. Then we dealt with *Fiammetta*. Her bows were badly crumpled, but the main damage was above the water line. Down in the forepeak were eighteen inches of water. We hadn't an axe, so I cut a splintered, straining plank with what was left in the magazine of Pink's pistol. His iron bar did the rest. After that we had to get out of the forepeak pretty fast.

I lowered the children overboard to Pink, and we waited at a safe distance to see the last of *Fiammetta*. In five minutes she dipped the great rent in her bows under water, and in another two she was gone.

"WHERE are we?" I asked Pink.

"If we take that little toy compass of yours and sit quietly in the stern and keep rowing due north," he said, "we're going to land on Weymouth sands in a couple of hours. Oh, muvver, look at them kids what's been out fishing! It don't seem 'ardly safe in that little boat, do it?"

It certainly didn't. Our fragile solitude was even grimmer in the cold hour at daybreak when the easterly breeze got up, and one could see the ranks of the waves—petty channel waves, but all higher than my shoulders—dancing between white Arish Mell and Portland. They flicked the pram and splashed into my children's faces and woke them up.

Jerry's eyes opened to the sky above him, and took notice of Pink, swinging and smiling. Then he twisted himself round and looked straight into my face.

"Daddy!" he yelled, and tried to jump up. "George, here's Daddy!"

We shipped a bucketful of water, and I held them fast between my knees.

"Where were you? Who were those men? Where are we? Where's Mummy?"—the questions fell over each other.

"Darlings, it was all a mess," I said. "We were all going out on a yacht, and then we got separated, and those dam' fools kept you until they could find me. And I was away on a job, and took some finding. It was all rather like the war, you see."

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That phrase explained nothing to them, but meant a lot. They were too young to remember anything of the war. Yet the conversations they had overheard and the endless, curious chattering between themselves and school-fellows had given them a steadfast impression of a world full of separation and anxiety, especially of separation, which, nevertheless, was part of the family tradition and therefore not to be feared—a world inexplicable but enviably exciting, and ennobled, at any rate to children, by the simply understood virtues of duty and courage.

" Were there bombs ? " George asked.

" Daddy doesn't mean that kind of war," Jerry explained with the superiority of two extra years. " Daddy means that he's had to go where he was told."

" I don't like war," said George positively. " I've got a headache."

I begged them to tell me if they were hurt or hungry. No, they had had a custard trifle for supper and lots of sardines.

" More sardines than Mummy ever lets us eat," George added.

Children are queer creatures. They accept pleasure so wholeheartedly in spite of anxiety. Well, may the Lord take Fallot's catering into consideration when he comes up for judgment !

" Nothing like a spot of bailing for keeping warm," Pink interrupted. " Now, if one of you two chaps takes the dipper and chucks the water overboard as fast as it comes in, we'll get along fine."

" *I* will," said Jerry.

" No *I* want it," said George, and rocked the boat.

This was like old times again. I had to lay it down that each would bail for five minutes. They were not at all afraid of the sea. A grown-up awaking in the bottom of that pram would have yelled with alarm. But since Pink and I seemed to accept our position as perfectly normal, so did the children. And what was mere water, I suppose, compared to the overwhelming, long-expected appearance of a parent ?

They were exasperatingly calm about their experiences. All I could gather was they had slept a lot, and that the friends whom I had sent to fetch them in my car had been kind, had even played with them when they weren't busy.

" Was it silly of me to be frightened ? " George asked, snuggling in between my knees while his brother bailed.

PINK'S reckoning was right. At full dawn we could see the houses of Weymouth, and when the sun rose clear of the channel clouds we were a mile from the beach. The harsh hiss of the pram's bows on sand was as welcome a sound as ever I heard in my life. We ran her up above high-water mark, and handed her over to the care of a man who hired out motor-boats. I don't know whether he had dealt so long with the public that nothing surprised him, or whether his own seamanship was limited to a holiday beach. He merely said that he would have preferred something bigger himself.

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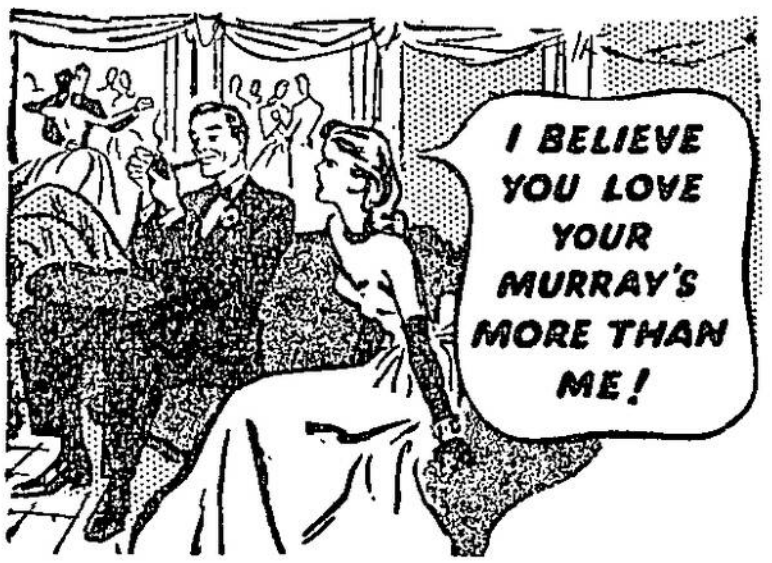

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I telephoned Cecily. It was thirty-six hours since she had heard of me. The dead, monotonous " *Yes ?* " with which she answered the telephone made my voice break with pity for her. I told her that I had got them, that I was taking a taxi and should be home in three quarters of an hour. She did not reply for several seconds, but I had no need to ask if she was still there. Then came the flood of maternal questions in the warm, the eager, the beloved voice and I found myself answering, just as if we had been caught in the rain on an early morning walk, that there was nothing which a hot bath and a good breakfast wouldn't cure.

Pink and his ticks went straight up to London by the morning train. I sent a long wire to Roland and that was all. I had had enough of Roland's affairs, and I wanted Pink to tell his own story. He met, I gather, with a good deal of scepticism, and they confined him to a room in a cheap hotel during the incubation period while they fed his ticks on an unfortunate bullock. In the same week Holberg disappeared from Tangier, leaving nothing behind him but the wind blowing through his house.

After that, when the bullock and its stall and all but the skin of the attendant vets had been burned, of course I had to go to London and be interviewed by one official after another, all solemn with secrecy. My impression, for what it's worth, was that they were far more terrified of a question being asked in the House than of familiar problems of biological warfare, and that they felt I had shown a lamentable want of tact in not accompanying *Fiammetta* to the bottom of the Channel.

But for Pink nothing was too good; and he came into his own with very little help from me. He is now too thoroughly occupied ever to be bothered again with visionary politics. If he can manage to stay alive, I feel that he may yet retire to the boatyard he wanted, and run the local Boys' Club and become a Justice of the Peace.

As for me, I shall never forget the joy of that first day at home, and how the wings of our mutual love folded over us and held us. After that, things didn't go so well. I wouldn't speak of what had happened and Cecily was worried about me and I resented it. So, though all that matters has been told, there is, perhaps, one more question to be answered. And indeed I myself, when I have watched the revival of some tragedy, have often wondered how the last man left upon the stage could bear his life thereafter.

It was the children themselves who brought on the crisis. One day, when I was too silent to be teased, they teased their mother, chanting to her *Ruthless Rhymes* which she detests and they dearly love, seeing in them no more relation to life than has a fairy story.

" O, mother dear, what is that mess," they yelled, dancing round her, inspired and soulless imps, " which looks like strawberry jam ? "

I screamed at them in a furious temper, and went out over the downs, ill and ashamed, and didn't come back for hours.

Well, I suppose the dramatist merely assumed that the last man upon the stage went to his priest and that was that. We, less simple and fortunate, have to put up with more secular authority. But in fact a man who has such a wife as I has little need of a psychologist. She saw what was wrong and persuaded me to tell it, and these pages are for her.

* * *

ANSWERS to ILL MET BY MOONLIGHT on page 44

1. *The three sons of the Wife of Usher's Well, in the ballad of that name; author unknown. When the three ghosts visited their mother's house "their hats were o' the birk."*
2. *The train in the play "The Ghost Train", by Arnold Ridley.*
3. *Banquo, in "Macbeth", by William Shakespeare. In a scene on the blasted heath, Banquo's ghost smiled as he brought up the rear of eight future kings, all his descendants.*
4. *The ghost of Queen Anne Boleyn, who walked on the Tower of London in the song, "With her head tucked underneath her arm"; the words are by Weston and Lee.*
5. *Sir Herman Von Starkenfaust, in the story, "The Spectre Bridegroom", by Washington Irving. The daughter of the Baron Von Landshort fell in love with him while he was posing as a ghost.*
6. *Mary Rose, in the play of that name, by J. M. Barrie. When young Harry, her son, returned to look at his old home, the ghost of Mary Rose appeared and sat on his knee.*
7. *Jacob Marley, in "A Christmas Carol", by Charles Dickens. He had been dead seven years when his ghost returned to his old rooms to warn Scrooge, who now lived there, to mend his ways.*
8. *Lucy Gray, in the poem, "Lucy Gray or Solitude", by William Wordsworth. The ghost of the child lost in the snow "sings a solitary song" as she "trips along."*

* * *

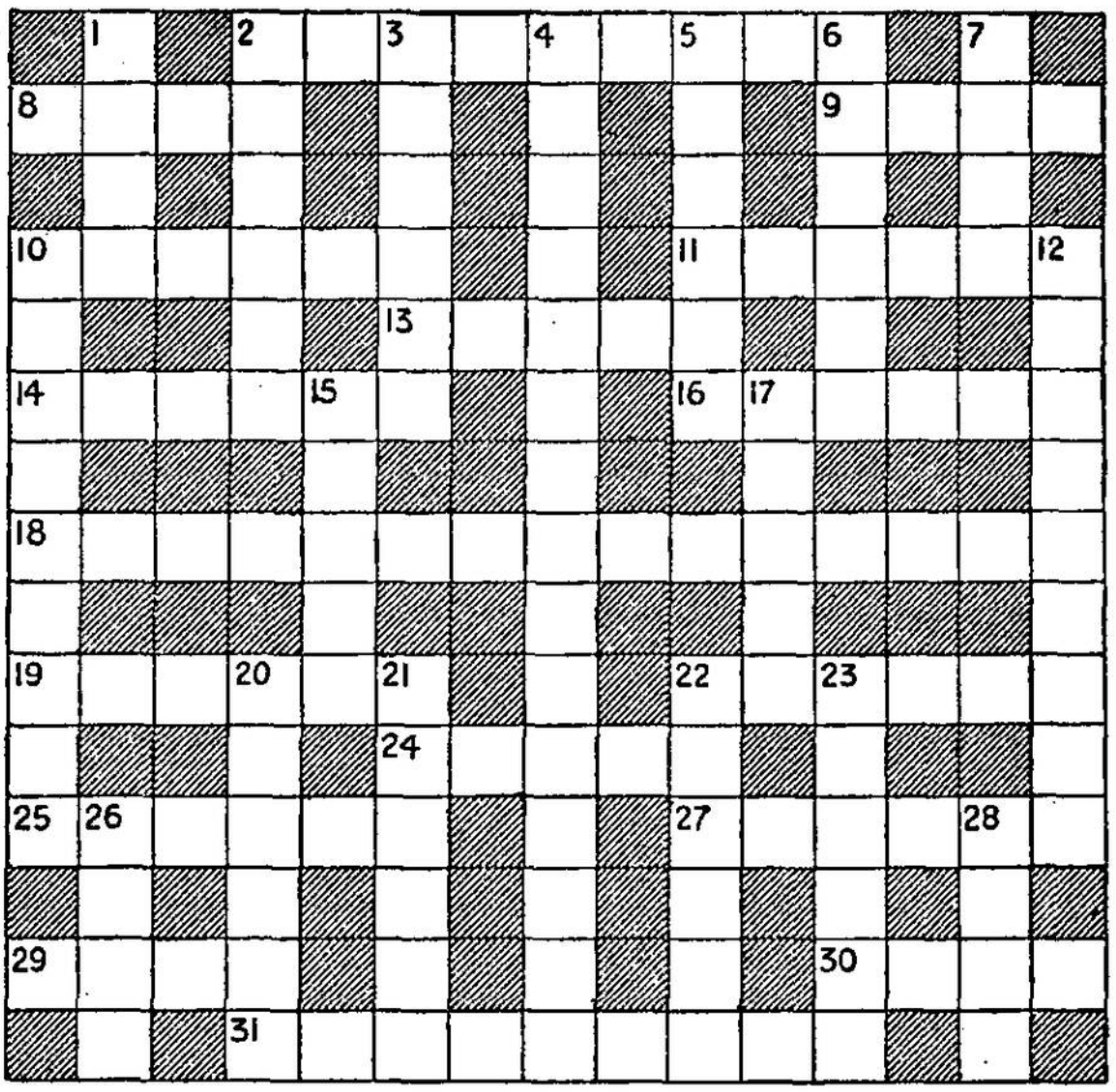
SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 160

Across. 2, Trombones. 8, Faro. 9, Take. 10, Propel. 11, Banana. 13, Ernie. 14, Tender. 16, Rialto. 18, Falling headlong. 19, Lariat. 22, Haggai. 24, Uncle. 25, Yonder. 27, Lalage. 29, Sere. 30, East. 31, Deposited.

Down. 1, Fair. 2, Torpid. 3, Ostler. 4, Behind the scenes. 5, Number. 6, Stanza. 7, Skin. 10, Pitifully. 12, Alongside. 15, Eliza. 17, India. 20, Indeed. 21, Turnip. 22, Helmet. 23, Galled. 26, Open. 28, Gosh.

ARGOSY CROSS WORD

Solution on page 159



CLUES

Across

2 They may emit a stern boom (9).

8 Card game where you can get a long way on nothing (4).

9 Staked, but lost all the money (4).

10 Rope in and drive on (6).

11 Degree for the Darlings' dog (6).

13 So disturbing for Irene to become a boy, even a diminutive one! (5).

14 This should be legal, and it sounds gentle (6).

16 You can get rat oil from the Exchange (6).

18 Shows how a half-niggled loan may seriously affect one's balance (7, 8).

19 A trial rope (6).

22 Was this prophet a frightful old woman who got gay in Paris? (6).

24 A relative Shylock (5).

25 Over there is where Rodney had his accident (6).

27 For her sake I left Rome for Rimini, according to Kipling (6).

29 "Make those laugh whose lungs are tickle o' the —" (Hamlet) (4).

30 This Wind of Love blows from a cold quarter (4).

31 Poets died—or were they put down? (9).

Down

1 The type which none but the brave deserves? (4).

2 Stupefied on a hill-top before a backward dip (6).

3 A stable worker (6).

4 Chinese send Beth, under cover (6, 3, 6).

5 A more unfeeling figure? (6).

6 "And each exalted — teems with thought!" (Pope) (6).

7 The ink's upset—hide! (4).

10 Hole one completely, in a pathetic way (9).

12 Close to a hypotenuse, perhaps (9).

15 But this Shavian heroine belied her surname (5).

17 Found in a plain diamond ring (5).

20 Not the same as inaction, certainly (6).

21 Just the vegetable to upset a highwayman (6).

22 "She saw the — and the plume" (Tennyson) (6).

23 Annoyed because a young lady was first (6).

26 There's nothing on the enclosure—it's not enclosed even (4).

28 Expression of surprise, when you go quietly (4).

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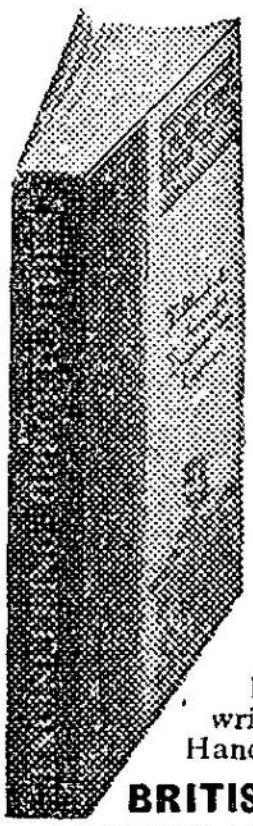

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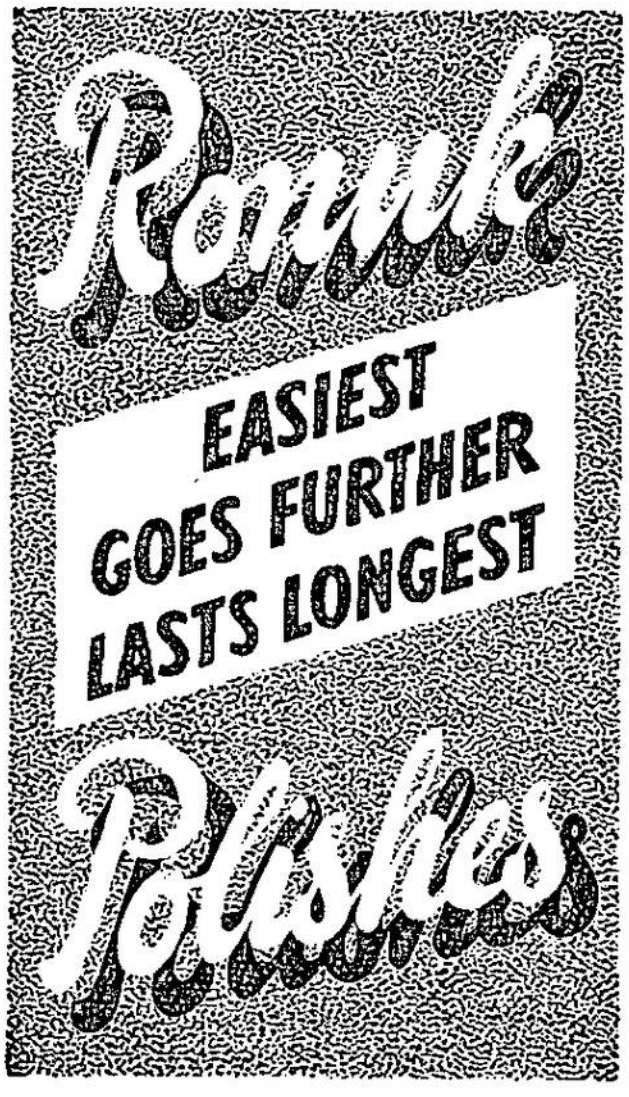

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